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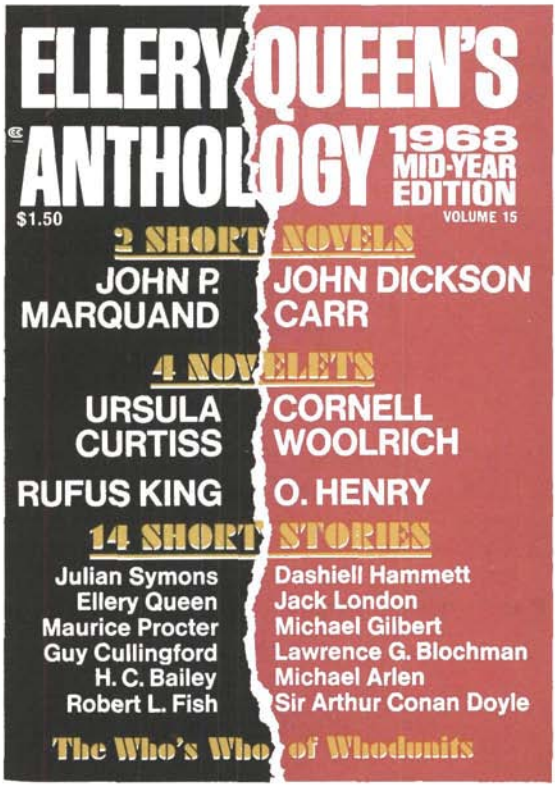

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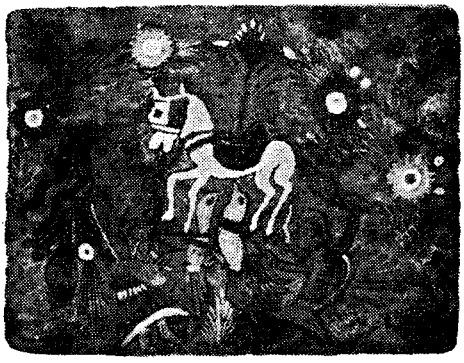

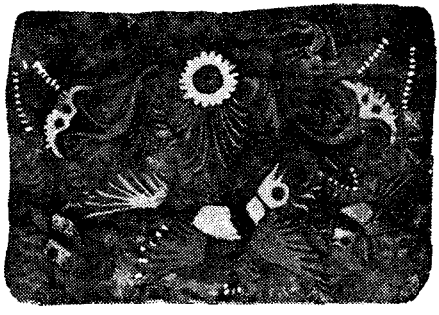

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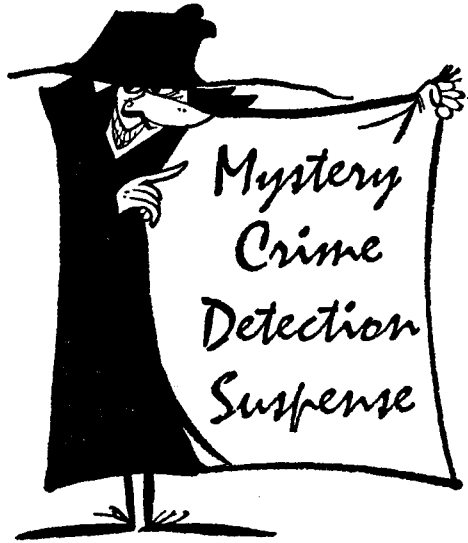

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a *NEW* Hildegarde Withers novelet by
STUART PALMER

Yes, by the patron saint of amateur detectives, Hildegarde Withers is back! It's like a breath of spring after a long hard winter. Hildegarde Withers—the famous female ferret, the spinster schoolteacher snoop, the petticoat private eye, the lady (and we do mean lady) manhunter—the irrepressible, irresistible, irreproachable Hildy is back in action, once more the self-appointed gadfly of Inspector Oscar Piper, an extraordinarily patient man notorious for his impatience.

And, in this newest long novelet, meet an interesting cast of characters. Cecily Barth—one of the most glamorous and most notorious of early movie queens who once rivaled Theda Bara. Boris Abbas—violent-tempered ex-professional wrestler, now a TV producer doing the life story of the former "Love Goddess of the Silver Screen." Gary Twill—a Hollywood writer in the twilight of his checkered career. Jane Roberts—blonde curvaceous confidential secretary. Lilith Lawrence—dark-haired, billowy-hipped star on her way up . . . and assorted pips and squeaks.

Hildegarde was never more lively, more persistent, more amusing. She's a real tonic these downbeat days . . .

HILDEGARDE WITHERS IS BACK

by STUART PALMER

A MUFFLED DIN SOUNDED IN THE anteroom, and then the door banged open and an unexpected guest backed her way into the Inspector's office, fending off the uniformed guardian of the gates with handbag and umbrella. "Oscar! *Do* something!" she cried.

"Hildegarde Withers, as I live and breathe!" gasped the grizzled skipper of Homicide, managing to get out of his swivel chair and restore some semblance of order. "Don't mind the sergeant, he's a new man and didn't know you from Adam—I mean, Eve. If you'd let me know you were coming to town I'd have had the welcome mat out. But I thought you were safely retired, and busy with your African daisies out in California."

"African *violets*, Oscar." The

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schoolteacher was preening her feathers like a ruffled Buff Orpington. "And if you dare to add insult to injury by making one of your characteristic snide remarks about my new hat—"

"That's a *hat?* I thought it was a fallen soufflé!"

"This is hardly the time for persiflage. Not when I've just flown all the way across the country to come to your aid on the Barth case."

"By broomstick? Well, dear lady, we've been getting along pretty well here at Centre Street without any amateur help since you quit being self-appointed gadfly to the Police Department—" Here Inspector Oscar Piper broke into a slow double-take. "The *what* case?"

"Barth, Cecily Barth. You do recall the name?"

"It may ring a bell somewhere, but just now—"

"Oscar, I sometimes think that you are being intentionally dense! Cecily Barth happens to have been one of Hollywood's most famous stars in her day. You yourself must have been just about the right age to have had a schoolboy crush on her, back when she was the Love Goddess of the Silver Screen, unquote."

"I used to be a Tom Mix fan, myself," he said almost apologetically.

"But even you must have seen some of the recent newspaper publicity about how the great independent television producer Mr. Boris Abbas is producing the life story of Cecily Barth as a special on filmed TV, bringing a famous Hollywood writer here to do the script in collaboration with Cecily herself, testing dozens of young sexpot actresses to play the leading role, and so on and so forth?"

The Inspector carefully relighted his cigar. "Oh, *that* one! I've got the flimsies here somewhere. Yeah, right here. You call it the Barth case, but it was some scenario writer name of Gary Twill who did the Dutch Act out of his hotel window late yesterday afternoon. According to all reports, it was a simple case of suicide."

"Suicide is never simple! Oscar, most criminologists agree that falls from high windows, like drownings from canoes, are automatically suspect. Perfect murders, perhaps. I am quite aware of the fact that you police don't believe there is any such thing as the perfect murder, but remember, if it were perfect, you wouldn't know of it! And Gary Twill's death was no suicide, I'll wager a pretty penny. I feel it in my bones."

"Of which you have a complete set," Oscar Piper put in unkindly but accurately, softening the wisecrack with a Hibernian-type grin. "Look, Hildegarde old girl, I'm personally delighted to have you back in town and tonight will joyfully buy you a spaghetti dinner at any place you name. I think I know just how bad you're itching to make like the old firehorse at the sound of

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the siren, but believe me, this case just *ain't* it!"

"*Isn't* it," she corrected automatically.

"Okay, *isn't*. This Hollywood writer, the guy named Twill, had been out of work a while and he got this plush assignment to come to New York and do a TV script, with free hotel room and everything —and then it all went blooie. He had a thing going with the boss's playgirl-type secretary and he had a contract and he lost them both at the same time, the girl *and* the job. So he did the Dutch Act, like I said. What more do you want, chimes?"

"A suicide note or an eyewitness would help. Oscar, there is more here than meets the eye. I have known some screenwriters in my time—Los Angeles is crawling with them. They don't take their lives when they lose a girl, or a job either; they feel sure that another one, girl or job, will be along in a minute. Meanwhile, like Miniver Cheevy, they keep on drinking."

"Miniver *who?*"

"A character in an almost forgotten poem by an almost forgotten poet named Edwin Arlington Robinson. No matter. I became interested in this case because of a certain letter which was shown to me over a week ago by a neighbor of mine out in Santa Monica, a Mrs. Marcia Connell, whose three children are usually trampling down my flowerbeds. She happens to be the niece and presumably the only blood relation of the once glamorous Cecily Barth.

"I've caught glimpses of the old lady arriving on Christmas and birthdays, in an ancient Cadillac with equally ancient chauffeur, to deliver presents to her grandniece and grandnephews. Lady Bountiful —but she *never* has helped when Marcia needed a new washer and dryer or the children's teeth needed straightening. And I've seen Cecily mentioned in the newspapers; she's a fanatic anti-vivisectionist, makes speeches for the SPCA and Humane Society drives, and once—before arthritis totally crippled her below the belt and confined her to a wheel chair—she even tried to lead a protest march against the Chicago stockyards because of what she considered cruelty in slaughtering methods. Quite a personality, Oscar. Would you care to read the letter she wrote to her niece, a week or more ago?"

"Yes, but not very much," said Oscar Piper. Nevertheless he meekly accepted the note, neatly typed on Hotel Harlow Towers stationery, and read:

Darling,

Rain rain rain here in New York, and I wish I was home in my own house in Coldwater Canyon where I belong. I hope Jack is still working at Douglas and bringing home his paycheck intact. And darling Loramae and Timmy and Ricky! I hope to be back home for

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Christmas, but if I am still tied up here I have just oodles of goodies I've collected in these wonderful toy stores like Schwartz's, all wrapped and ready.

The script goes well, except that Gary Twill, the writer—who is right handy in the room next to my suite—is sometimes a bit stubborn and wants documentation for things that happened instead of trusting my memory, which as you know is perfect. I usually get my way, however. He does the structure and first draft of the scenes and then we hash them over and finally I type up the finished version and correct the dialogue and so forth. We are now on the final scenes.

I confess I'll be glad when it's over. The weather has been so nasty that I don't have Felicio, the most obliging Puerto Rican bellboy, push my wheel chair out on any more shopping trips. I don't feel so safe in this big town, either. Somebody doesn't want this film released—I've had some threatening phone calls and so has Mr. Abbas and Gary Twill.

And I tell you, dear, I can almost smell Death around this hotel—close to me and coming closer. When I tell my fortune with the cards, I get the Queen of Spades or some other dismal symbol almost every time—and you know what that means!

I rescued a lost forlorn black kitten in an alleyway and sneaked it into the hotel—you know black cats are lucky! I named him Asmodeus, and I intend to bring him back with me and present him to our darlings.

If I ever come back! Marcia, I have a terrible presentiment that Death hovers over this old hotel—I mean it! Just as soon as the TV script is finished and approved by Mr. Abbas—a very strange man but you know producers, almost always the enemies of talent—and as soon as the picture is completely cast and costumes picked, I am getting out of here. Maybe I'll come back when they actually start shooting and maybe I won't. This Lilith Lawrence who is to play me looks the part all right—she is beautiful enough—but she underacts terribly. I hate to say it about anybody but I fear she's a Method actress!

Must close now—room service will be bringing up my dinner and I have to lock Asmodeus in the closet as the little black devil will dash out through any open door and then I have to chase him, in my wheel chair, yet—unless Felicio or Gary Twill is around to help.

Don't worry about what I said—at my age Death is only a heartbeat away anyhow. And I know how to protect myself. I have a very authentic-looking pistol that shoots ammonia, plus some other precautions, like a chain on the door.

Kiss the dear kiddies for me. Your affectionate

Auntie Cecily

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The Inspector handed back the letter and shrugged. "Sounds like some kind of a nut," he observed. "And I thought black cats were supposed to be *un*lucky."

"I am not interested in primitive superstitions, Oscar. During the Dark Ages in Europe—and even in England during the witchcraft hunts—hundreds of thousands of cats were tortured and killed because they were thought to be witches' familiars, and rats and mice overran the land. How any cats survived I'll never know, but I prefer dogs myself, particularly big Standard poodles like my dear old Talley, who is languishing in a boarding kennel at the moment."

The Inspector looked at his watch pointedly.

"Very well, Oscar we'll get down to cases. Perhaps Cecily is a bit of a psychic, or has some ESP precognition power. Coming events do cast their shadows before: Abraham Lincoln foresaw his own death in a dream, and the day before President Kennedy was assassinated a clairvoyant ran all over Washington trying to get to somebody and warn him not to go to Dallas."

"Coincidence," said Oscar Piper.

"Perhaps. But suppose somebody actually *doesn't* want Cecily's life story to come out—somebody who knew her 'way back when and has since, shall we say, reformed and hoped that the wild oats would stay buried?"

"Come off it! The old dame is strictly a has-been! Who cares about scandals that happened more than forty years ago? It's ancient history. And how would knocking off the writer—or Cecily either—prevent Mr. Abbas from making the picture anyway?"

"I don't know—yet! But I have all the newspaper clippings here in my handbag. There is something rotten, and I don't mean in Denmark. I'm not just working on a hunch, or on my so-called feminine intuition either. Oscar, how deeply have you looked into this Gary Twill death?"

"Things have changed in the Police Department, Hildegarde. I'm strictly administrative now, and other men on precinct level do the legwork. I'm supposed to be an Inspector."

"Well, then—*inspect!*"

"Hildy, why are you getting the wind up and making all these waves?"

"I'll tell you exactly why. I only got into town this morning—I tried to phone you from the airport and got a fast brushoff from that uniformed ape in your outer office. He told me you were in conference!" She sniffed. "You were not to be disturbed!"

"That's right, I was down having a look at the morning lineup."

"I got another brushoff at the Hotel Harlow Towers, where Cecily Barth is incommunicado and Mr. Abbas is too tied up to see anybody, and so on. But I had noticed

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that Gary Twill, the man you say committed suicide, was reported by hotel employees to have gone out on a brief errand shortly before he died. He returned with a paper bag which he took up to his room. Right?"

"According to these reports, right. But it all fits. He thought he needed some Dutch courage—"

"I do wish, Oscar, you would stop insulting the people of Holland. And why should Gary Twill go out in the rain? Why buy liquor himself when he could have called room service and had drinks sent up from the bar and charged to Mr. Abbas? Or at least sent a bellboy out on his errand? It just doesn't fit! So having nothing better to do, I provided myself with a newspaper photograph of Twill—who, I must say, was a distinctive-looking man well over six feet, with prematurely white hair and I went out cruising the neighborhood shops to see if I could discover the *real* purpose of his last errand." She paused dramatically.

"And so what?"

"So *this!* He not only bought a bottle of champagne at a package store on Sixth Avenue, but he also stopped in at a travel agency on Fifth and purchased a first-class airplane ticket to Los Angeles on the 11:00 p.m. flight! Now, don't tell me that a man who intends to die the hard way would go out and spend almost $200 on a plane ticket that he didn't intend to use!"

The Inspector frowned. "Then something must have happened to push him over the edge—"

"Exactly! Something—or someone."

"I mean, to make him change his mind." But Oscar Piper was not quite as sure as he had been a few moments before.

"These are deep waters, Oscar. And getting deeper. If we could only look back in Time, and see Yesterday . . ."

It was late morning on a rainy Wednesday. Or a rainy morning on a late Wednesday. Gary Twill wasn't quite sure and didn't care which. He opened his bloodshot eyes somewhat gingerly, to survey the ceiling of his hotel room, wishing fervently that he were far, far away from this dingy pad, far from the darling if slightly demented old bat of a Cecily—he sometimes thought of her as "Nightmare Alice"—in the next suite, far from Boris Abbas in his office up in the penthouse furnished in silver and black upholstery, and most particularly far from Janey Roberts, Valkyrie-cum-vixen.

Far from Manhattan. The big city, to a native Californian, always seemed dirty, raw, and cold—when it wasn't dirty, hot, and humid. Twill had worked almost all night on the final sequence of *The Thousand and One Loves of Cecily Barth*— a title he loathed, but maybe he could talk Abbas into changing

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it later. He had turned the final ten pages over to Cecily for her to read and approve and type up the final version with two carbons; it kept her feeling that she was a part of it all to bang it out on her portable electric typewriter, and she could do nice clean copy. She was to take it up to Abbas, or at least leave it with Janey for the great man to read later. Anyway, the damn thing was done, finis, complete.

What a wild assignment! What a wild collaboration, with this crazy old relic who fancied herself as a writer because she'd taken some correspondence course in screenwriting and had turned out a dozen or so dramas that never even got to first base with movie or TV story editors! But today not even a former Oscar winner could pick and choose his assignments; there was 80% unemployment in the Writers Guild West.

The big man sat up in his tangled blankets and sighed, ruffling his almost white but still very curly locks. Then he fumbled for the phone and called down to room service for breakfast—not that his stomach was really awake yet.

After a while the ubiquitous Felicio rolled in a cart bearing a pot of coffee, orange juice, some cold toast and obviously colder eggs. Felicio also wore his hopeful Puerto Rican smile, beneath the nose which had been flattened during some earlier attempts to become the terror of the welterweights—but you had to give the guy credit for trying.

Sometimes he was very trying, like now. For he had another manuscript with him; Twill could see it sticking out of a pocket. The Great American short story again. "Oh, God!" moaned the man in the bed. "Not today!"

"But you have feenish the job. You will go back soon to Hollywood. You take my manuscript and show it to Mr. Goldwyn like you promise?"

"Yes, yes. Just leave it on the bureau."

Gary Twill might just as well have said "wastebasket"—and the hypersensitive Felicio sensed it immediately. He withdrew into his Latin sheath, with injured dignity. "I guess it was all just kidding, no?" There was a sentence or two in mumbled Spanish, too fast for Gary Twill to catch—except for one or two words, and those not customarily found in Spanish-English tourist dictionaries. The door closed behind Felicio, and none too gently.

Twill sighed and shrugged. These would-be authors! He really should not have jollied Felicio along—now he'd probably made another enemy in this God-forsaken place. Twill drank the orange juice and a few sips of the cold coffee, then went back to a troubled sleep, from which he was rudely awakened around 2:00 p.m. by the sound of a key in the door

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and the entrance of a somewhat oversize but very blonde and very curvaceous young woman whose secret Mona Lisa smile boded no particular good.

She had been here many times before, under happier circumstances. It was obvious that at this moment she was not on loving dalliance bent, to put it mildly. "You could have knocked, Janey dear," he said, as he drew a sheet over the bare and exposed portions of his muscular figure.

"I could have knocked with a hammer on your thick skull, buster," said Jane. "With joy and gusto. But as it happens I just dropped by to return your room key, and to be the first to bring you some good news. Good from my point of view at least. Not from yours."

"Don't be unkind when I have a king-size hangover. What happened? Didn't Cecily approve the script? She's already okayed all but the last ten pages."

"Oh, she typed up the last scene real neat, and she said she approved the whole thing. She'd do anything for you, Lover Boy, like most women. But when His Nibs read your hunk of tripe—"

"Rewrite required?" asked Gary Twill, moaning.

"Rewrite my sainted painted toenails! Mr. Abbas read it and then he blew up and he said—and I quote—that it is the most misbegotten, unshootable, useless one hundred and eighty pages of junk that he has ever seen, even in a lifetime involved with writers who can't write, and that it turns out to be sophomoric fantasy instead of the objective semi-documentary biography he hired you to do, and that if he could he'd hold up your check and that he fervently wished someone would restrain him from coming down here and strangling you with his bare hands for wasting over four grand of his hard-earned money and then delivering a package of pure garbage!"

Jane was enjoying this, Gary Twill suddenly discovered. She was trying to get a bit of her own back, as our British cousins say. But he was now fairly wide-awake. "Come now; what was so wrong with the damn script?"

"You ought to know! You fictionized the whole thing!"

"Suddenly I feel confused—I didn't think it was fiction. But dear sweet love, knock it off! So what if Abbas puts another writer on the final, shooting version of the script? Forgive and forget; come back to Hollywood with me and live it up a little! We fit together so good—you make me happy!"

"Slap-happy," said Jane. "Mister Twill, I wouldn't go to Hollywood with you if by any chance I wanted to go to Hollywood and you were the accredited, uniformed driver of a brand-new Greyhound bus! I don't mess around with a guy who's already had three wives!"

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"Two, and both legally divorced. I only pay token alimony." He sighed, the handsome if slightly raddled face looking hurt. "You shouldn't insist on taking it so seriously. I should have told you in the beginning, I know. But please, baby —I got a headache. I worked all night. Everybody hates me. Cecily thinks I didn't do her amours full justice, now you say Abbas isn't satisfied with the script, and Felicio hates me because I don't flip over his short stories cribbed from O. Henry—"

"And don't forget Lilith Lawrence, buster!"

"Lilith? Hell, she got the part, didn't she? She's set to play Cecily, thanks to me."

"And you soft-talked her into testing for the role on the Beautyrest, which got her into trouble with her agent who happens also to be her boy friend, a guy even bigger than you are and considerably stronger if not meaner, by the name of Hymie Rose. Keep out of dark alleys, darling, while you're still in Manhattan."

"You *do* give a damn, then, Janey, darling!" Gary Twill said hopefully.

"Not for you, for Hymie. He might just possibly get caught, though it would be justifiable homicide in my book, you—you ratfink!" Jane went out, slamming the door behind her.

Twill winced and then slid out of bed, stark naked. He paused to take a medicinal gulp from the almost-empty bottle of whiskey on the bureau and then—when the warm glow had hit his insides to a satisfactory degree—set about showering, shaving, and putting on some clothes. He'd phone Abbas pretty soon and find out how much Janey, in her vicious, holier-than-thou mood, had exaggerated the foulup with the script. Probably she had exaggerated quite a lot, because while it wasn't going to be nominated for an Emmy it was still a damn good piece of work, considering what there had been to work with. Cecily's life story almost outstripped *Fanny Hill* and *Forever Amber* combined.

When Gary Twill was half dressed he stopped short, sniffing. There was a strange smell in the air. It wasn't Janey's too liberal sprinkling of "My Sin," or the breakfast eggs, or Cecily's damn cat that had its litter box in the otherwise unused connecting bathroom; it was something else—something Gary couldn't identify.

"New York just smells, I guess," he said to himself. "Too many people too close together." Being an essentially factual and objective man, he did not once consider the odor to be the smell of death, nor did he—for all his sensitivity—hear the beating of dark, invisible wings overhead.

"Here goes," he said aloud, and finished the bottle. Then he mentally girded his loins, put on his

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armor, and went down the hall and up the elevator to the penthouse. Abbas had both his offices and his living quarters here, plus a tiny and somewhat bedraggled patio and garden outside, forty stories above the street.

Miss Bixby, the built-in receptionist, was a dour old doll, a sort of birdlike old biddy from whom he had never even been able to win a smile. Not at least until this afternoon, when she told Gary Twill that the great man was much too busy to see him, and that his severance check would be mailed to his agent. Gary Twill ruefully chalked up another sworn enemy, but he headed for the inner door.

It was locked. "He's got Miss Lawrence and her agent in there now," proffered Miss Bixby. "And I don't think waiting around will do you any good, frankly. Jane distinctly said that I was to tell you not to wait."

But Gary Twill waited anyway, reading an old magazine from the coffee table without actually seeing it. After a while the inner door opened and Lilith Lawrence—the spitting image of Cecily Barth at 25, even to the dark sleek hair and the billowy hips—emerged, closely followed by her agent. Hymie was a robust, sharply dressed man with close-shaved but darkish-blue chin and cheeks, who looked straight through Gary Twill and headed for the exit. Lilith Lawrence (born Mae Klotz) hesitated for a moment, giving the writer her sweetest smile.

"So sorry, Gary darling," she trilled. "But that's the way the ball bounces, isn't it? I only—" Hymie Rose grasped her by the elbow and propelled her hastily out of the place.

"So now can I see Abbas?" Twill demanded of the woman at the desk.

She shrugged and picked up the phone. After a moment she put it down and said, "Mr. Abbas says to tell you that he's very busy and that your room rent is paid up only through today and that if you keep hanging around and bothering him I am to call Mr. Durkin, who as you know is the house detective, and have you forcibly eee-jected!"

"I get the message," said Gary Twill. "Have a good time at the next Coven." He departed, with whatever dignity was left to him. Which was not too much.

As he rode down in the elevator he decided to travel westward under the alias of George Spelvin or something; no use letting everybody in the trade who read *Daily Variety* and its "NY to LA and LA to NY" column know that screenwriter Gary Twill had flopped in the big city and was returning ahead of time with his tail between his legs . . .

In Inspector Piper's office Miss Hildegarde Withers was holding forth. "But don't you see, Oscar, this man Twill was out of his ele-

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ment here in New York. He was surrounded by people he didn't understand and who didn't understand him. This independent producer, Mr. Abbas, is reputed throughout show business to be a man of violent temper. According to the newspaper accounts, in his earlier days he was a professional wrestler in Hungary and a protégé of Sandor Szabo, whoever that was—"

"Just one of the greatest mat men in history," said Piper, brightening.

"You see? If he became enraged at his writer—?"

"Hildegarde, you're tilting at windstorms."

"It's *windmills,* if you insist on quoting from books you've never read! Abbas is a possibility, anyway. He had the physical ability to throw anybody through a window or over a parapet. And then there is this Jane Roberts person, the blonde Amazon type. With whom Gary Twill was for a time intimate, to put it politely. A woman scorned, Oscar—you know how dangerous they are."

"Dream on, dream on. In this day and age women don't kill for that, not good-looking ones anyway."

The spinster schoolteacher was consulting her sheaf of newspaper clippings. "Then what about Lilith Lawrence, the girl chosen to play the part of the young Cecily in the TV film? Here's a night-club photo of her and Gary Twill, holding hands at some place called El Morocco and looking very fatuously at one another. A girl as physically equipped as Lilith must have plenty of boy friends, some of whom might have resented a Hollywood writer getting into the act, as the phrase goes. An obvious jealousy motive. And there is also the unpleasant Mr. Durkin, the house detective, who was very nasty to me this morning when I tried to see Cecily. According to the newspaper stories he had had several altercations with Twill over noise and high jinks in the hotel room. He's a suspect to be reckoned with."

"He's also an ex-cop," Piper said. "I remember vaguely that there was some beef connected with his leaving the Force. That I will look into, if you insist. But don't let me stop you—go on with your brainwashing."

"I think you mean brainstorming, but no matter. You're a real Mr. Malaprop, Oscar. There is also this bellboy named Felicio Bonaventura, who keeps cropping up in the affair and who seems to have told each reporter a different story. Anyway, not one of these people has an airtight alibi for the time of the murder—if it was, as I believe, an actual murder."

"But do they *need* alibis? And while you're making up your list, better put down dear old Cecily Barth too. I don't see any motive for her—but you never know. And the wheel chair can be only a prop,

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and she can really walk as good as anybody else—"

"As *well,* Oscar! And I think you have been watching too many old movies on the Late Late Show. Even if it weren't for her crippling arthritis, even if she could get out of the wheel chair and walk, how on earth could she—a frail woman weighing less than a hundred pounds—throw a big man out of a window?"

"It's your frammis," said Oscar Piper. "Personally, I think it was the butler. Only I guess there really isn't any butler in our cast of characters, is there?"

"You're not being very funny. And you haven't explained the bottle of champagne or the airline ticket. I think the ticket alone proves that my worst suspicions are justified."

"Do you ever have any *best* suspicions?" He grinned, and chose a fresh cigar. "Hildegarde, I'm very fond of you, but sometimes you're nuttier than a fruit cake."

"In case you don't know it, there are some new recipes for fruit cake. Remember, Oscar, that Cecily Barth did step on a lot of toes in her heyday, and no doubt she made a lot of enemies. In her time as a movie queen she was, according to legend, no better she should be, leading men on and then throwing them aside—"

"Like a wornout glove?"

"—and wrecking many a marriage and many a career. Her life story, if presented on television, might just possibly ruin certain people who have since grown mature and respectable. Suppose for a moment that she, and not Gary Twill at all, was the intended victim? Remember Cecily's letter to her niece? Suppose Gary Twill had been trying to protect her, and somehow got too close to the truth?"

"My supposer isn't quite that active nowadays, Hildegarde. But let's look at this thing seriously for a moment. It just *has* to be suicide. Twill was a big powerful, athletic-type man and nobody could have thrown or pushed him out of a hotel window, not without a hell of a lot of commotion anyway."

"Unless he was knocked unconscious first, perhaps?"

"You're *reaching,* Hildegarde. No, I have a hunch he took the easy way out."

"Suicide is 'easy'?" she snapped. "That could only be suggested by someone who has never experienced it. Oh, you know what I mean! And my dear Oscar, time was when if I came into your office with a bee in my bonnet, you'd have come instantly alive, grabbed your hat and a handful of those dreadful stogies, and we'd have taken off on the chase."

"Time *was,*" admitted the Inspector soberly. "I'm strictly desk level now; I don't actually go out on cases and try to do the work of the precinct men. And remember,

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neither of us is as young as we used to be."

"Speak for yourself, Oscar!" And Miss Withers gathered herself and her belongings together and made an abrupt exit, slamming the door so hard that, out in the anteroom, the sergeant swallowed his gum.

Thirty seconds later the sergeant had another shock, as he saw the skipper erupt from the inner office, hat and topcoat and cigars in hand. "Closed for the day," Inspector Oscar Piper barked in passing. "Hold the fort. I got to take off and try to keep my best friend from becoming her own worst enemy." He hurried out into the main hallway—where he found Miss Hildegarde Withers leaning against the bulletin board with a patient yet cryptic smile on her somewhat equine visage.

"So here we go again," she said. "Better late than never."

A little later the two oddly assorted sleuths climbed out of a taxi at the Hotel Harlow Towers, that once plush and now slightly rundown hostelry on Central Park South. They stood on the sidewalk, a chill autumnal wind whipping about their ankles, at presumably the same spot where Gary Twill had come plummeting down out of nowhere to splash his brains out on the cement. Just before 6:00 p.m. would have been a very busy hour at this location, as they both knew.

"It was only by the grace of God that the fool didn't take some innocent passerby with him on his trip to the Hereafter," observed Oscar Piper. "As it was—according to the reports—three people were knocked down, and one woman had to be hospitalized."

"Another argument against suicide," pointed out the retired schoolteacher. "Unless Gary Twill had no compassion."

Unfortunately there had been no actual eyewitnesses. If Twill had stood for a few moments in the window, or had hesitated on the narrow ledge outside while he screwed up his courage, nobody had seen him. It had all happened during one of Manhattan's sudden, blustering rainstorms. With no buildings across the street, nothing there except the reaches of a practically deserted Central Park, no one had been in position to catch an accidental glimpse of the beginning of the high dive—if indeed it had been a voluntary dive. Naturally, all the people in the street below were either shielded by umbrellas or by folded newspapers held over their heads; no eyes had been turned up against the slashing, icy rain.

"The first cruise car got here just two minutes after six," Oscar Piper was patiently explaining. "The officers took statements from several persons, including one newsboy—"

"Who very probably might be that little man in the kiosk over there," Miss Withers interrupted impatiently. "I wonder!"

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For once she wondered correctly. Mr. Herman Gittel, age 56, professional newsvendor, proved reasonably amenable to conversation after Miss Withers had purchased one copy of each of his evening newspapers, noting with sadness that the *Herald Tribune* was gone.

"Sure, I seen it," said Mr. Gittel. "And I heard him yelling all the way down. He sounded real weird, like he was nuts or something. Stuff musta blown out of his pockets, because the air was like a snowstorm with bits of paper."

"I really wish I knew exactly what bits of paper," remarked the schoolteacher wistfully. "But I suppose the street cleaners have done their work." She surveyed the gutter, poking into a storm drain with her umbrella.

"I kept me one sheet as sort of a souvenir," offered Mr. Gittel. And from his well-worn leather jacket he produced a wrinkled, rain-stained piece of manuscript paper—which proved to be Page 172 of what seemed to be a teleplay script. Miss Withers and the Inspector read:

SCENE 88—EXT COLDWATER CANYON HOUSE—MED CLOSE SHOT—DAY Cecily and Norman, she in daring and revealing swimsuit, he in smart yachting costume of the time. They are seated on a stone bench with profusion of flowers in B.G. He is concealing displeasure. Cecily is, however, mistress of the situation.

CECILY (moving closer)
Don't be difficult, Normie-pie. Isn't it enough to be my lover—do you have to be my leading man too? It really isn't your type of role anyway, Mr. Lasky says. And when The Hunchback of Notre Dame is released, you can write your own ticket at Essanay or anywhere.

NORMAN
It isn't just that, beautiful. You're a lovely cheat. We were supposed to have a date to go down to Ensenada and gamble a little over the weekend—you broke it because you had to stay home and read the script of Passion's Pawn or something, and then you were seen dancing at the Miramar with somebody whose name I intentionally don't remember.

CECILY.
Don't be difficult, darling. You have your career and I have mine. Let's leave it that way.

The rest was undecipherable. Which, Miss Withers thought, might be all for the best. "Oscar," she said on impulse, "will you buy this for me?"

Somewhat reluctantly, the Inspector invested two dollars for the tattered souvenir.

"So the guy took his rejected manuscript with him," he said. "You getting morbid or something, collecting mementoes yet?"

"One never knows," the schoolteacher pronounced mysteriously.

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"Anyway," Oscar Piper pointed out impatiently, "whatever personal stuff blew out of his pockets on the way down, his billfold was there and he was immediately identified."

"Did the airline ticket show up?"

"Not according to the report. Somebody probably found it and cashed it in. But he had a California driver's license, membership cards in the Writers Guild West, Greater Los Angeles Press Club, Ace Hudkins Health Club and Gym, Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP and CORE, and the usual jumble of credit cards. There was also over $300 in currency, and his room key tagged Hotel Harlow Towers 2466. Our men went right in and upstairs and reported that 2466, a single, was something of a shambles. Bed unmade, a litter of coffee cups and empty liquor bottles, and manuscript pages scattered all over the floor. The room was sealed off, but if you insist on taking a gander at it—"

Miss Withers had been vainly trying to count up to the windows of the 24th floor, but had only managed to get a crick in her neck. "If you count the lobby and presumably the mezzanine, and skip the thirteenth floor which no hotel ever has, then—" She sighed, and gave it up.

"It was the twenty-fourth all right," put in the cooperative Mr. Gittel. "I seen the open windows."

"Saw," corrected the schoolteacher absently. "But are you sure?"

"The hotel is forty stories, and I counted down to where I saw the open windows—"

"Windows? *Plural?"*

"Well, the one on the left was wide-open, curtains flying, and the second over to the right was just a little open. Before the cops got here it was closed."

"Very interesting," said the schoolteacher.

Inspector Oscar Piper found it less so. "Well," he grumbled, "there doesn't seem to be any question about the guy going out the window of his own room. I suppose you're hell-bent to go up to the pad and have a look for clues; but Hildegarde, I warn you, those were trained investigators who handled this case, working on modern scientific lines."

"And using computers, no doubt!" she said scornfully.

"Computers don't guess, like you do! Well, do we go upstairs?"

Miss Withers was deep in thought. "I suppose so. But I am more interested in *people* than in the scene of the crime. I want to see Cecily Barth and make sure that the poor crippled old woman isn't the victim of another 'accidental' suicide or something, and I want to meet the various people who had reasons, large or small, for disliking Gary Twill."

"Okay," said the Inspector resignedly. "Let's go."

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They entered the ornate but somewhat musty lobby of the old hotel, almost but not quite a relic of the Gaslight Era, and immediately learned from a supercilious desk clerk that Miss Barth wasn't seeing anybody or taking any phone calls, and furthermore—

"Who's your house dick?" demanded Oscar Piper.

"Why—our security officer is Mr. Durkin, but—"

"Get him here, fast." For once the schoolteacher had to admit the usefulness of a shiny gold badge (denoting over 30 years with the Department) which the Inspector flashed briefly. Because wheels turned, and Mr. Durkin (who had given her a sort of bum's rush earlier in the day) made an instant appearance from the restaurant-bar, where he must have been enjoying a very late lunch or a very early dinner for he was sucking his teeth and chewing chlorophyll mints.

"Was there something, Inspector?"

"There was and is."

The stubby, choleric house detective lost no time getting into the record that he was very shocked that a thing like this should have occurred at a quiet, respectable hotel like the Harlow Towers but what can you do? A suicide is a suicide, and the least said about it, the better. And after all, this Twill twerp wasn't the sort of guest who would have been made welcome at the hotel, only he was working for Mr. Abbas, a long-time resident of the penthouse and anything Mr. Abbas asks for—

"Okay. Abbas took a room here for his imported Hollywood writer, and a suite next door for Cecily Barth—is that right?" The Inspector was getting more than a little impatient, perhaps because he had had a light lunch and was thinking of dinner. "Anybody else?"

"Just Miss Lawrence, the star. She's in 2634. There's a reservation for the director when they pick one, and for the casting director and costumer. Mr. Abbas likes to have all his staff right on hand. Only his secretary, Jane Roberts, lives home —I think in Brooklyn Heights. And Miss Bixby, the receptionist, who doesn't really count. I'll be glad to take you upstairs—"

"You better be," said the Inspector. "You know, Mr. Durkin, I seem to remember something. You were a sergeant, working out in Queens or Staten Island or somewhere. There was a mishmash, and you were allowed to resign rather than stand charges. So you went out to California and didn't make out and then you came back to Manhattan and got this job."

They were going up in a rocky old elevator. "Can you cool it, Inspector?" Durkin was sweating. "I need this job, and what's past is past. You know how it is, Inspector."

"Maybe," said Oscar Piper. "We'll see how it plays. Where's the room

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the guy jumped out the window of?"

Durkin led the way down a long hall and then to the right, past a door which he pointed out as Miss Barth's. Then they came to Gary Twill's door. "It's been sealed," said the house detective.

"Then I'll just unseal it," said Oscar Piper.

They went into the room, Miss Withers entering with some trepidation for the place was—from her point of view—in a mess. The bed looked as if some insomniac hippopotamus had been in it, the desk and surrounding territory were littered with pages of crumpled manuscript, the bureau bore an empty whiskey bottle, and clothes were strewn everywhere.

"Yet he seems to have died," the schoolteacher pointed out, "rather nattily dressed in tweed jacket and slacks, including a necktie. Suicides usually don't care how they look. I think I have 'cased the joint,' as you would say. Let us go."

"Okay, okay," said the weary Inspector as he resealed the door. "So now you're satisfied?"

"Not at all! There were no signs of a fight or struggle, no broken furniture or other indications of combat. Yet still—"

"So it was suicide!"

"With the airline ticket?" The schoolteacher shook her head. Then she turned suddenly on the house detective. "Mr. Durkin, just why did you intimate that Gary Twill wasn't the type of guest welcomed at the sacrosanct Harlow Towers?"

Durkin said uneasily, "Well, he was a sort of Bohemian type—loud stereo music at all hours, hipped on the liberal bit and fraternizing with the help and giving 'em ideas. He had Felicio all steamed up about becoming a writer. And he had all sorts of people visiting his room. We can't have that sort of thing."

"Dear me, no! We must live in the last century, mustn't we?" Her glance was scathing.

"Okay, okay!" put in the Inspector. "Let's go see the movie queen."

"Miss Barth isn't going to let us in," predicted Durkin. "Since this happened she's been locked in tight, and she won't hardly even let the maids in to do her rooms."

"No room service? How does she eat?" asked Piper sensibly.

"Didn't you know? Miss Barth is a vegetarian, and lives mostly on wheat germ and crackers and stuff like that, all out of cans and boxes." They were now standing outside the door of the suite, and Durkin knocked. He knocked again, and then called out in a wheedling tone. "It's just Durkin, Miss Barth. Can we see you for a minute?"

There was not the slightest sound from within. Inspector Oscar Piper who was not the most patient man in the world, saw a bell and leaned on it. "Open up, lady—this is the police!"

"Go away!" came a querulous

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voice from within. "You're not fooling me with that old one!"

Oscar Piper sighed, and nodded at the house dick—who reluctantly produced his master key. It worked, at first. The door swung open and then held, caught by a heavy chain.

Miss Withers felt that this had been mismanaged enough, and spoke up. "Cecily, will you please listen?" she said in her best classroom voice of authority. "Mr. Durkin and Inspector Piper of the New York Police Department are with me, but I started the whole thing. You may not know me but my name is Hildegarde Withers and I happen to live next door to Marcia, out in Santa Monica, and she showed me your letter—"

"Prove it!" The voice was still hostile.

"Well, Marcia is on a new diet and has lost three pounds. John is working the swing shift at Douglas. Loramae had summer flu but got over it and she and her brothers are now trampling my flowerbeds again. Is that enough?"

"All right, I guess," came the disembodied voice. The door closed, a chain rattled free, and then they were permitted inside—all but Mr. Durkin, who found his way blocked by the Inspector's right arm.

"Look, I got my job to do," complained Durkin. "I got to tell her we got rules about not installing chains and keeping pets and—"

"Blow," said Oscar Piper, with the disdain of an honest cop for one who had cheated. Mr. Durkin blew.

And Miss Withers and the Inspector were entering a big, dimly lighted drawing room that smelled of perfume and cat and cigarette smoke. The schoolteacher had eyes only for the woman in the lightweight wheel chair who faced them, sitting on it grandly as if it were some sort of throne. She wore a flowered housecoat as if it were ermine and velvet, and her chin was high and defiant.

What was left of Cecily Barth, presumably in her seventies, was mostly spirit and spunk, though there were traces of ruined beauty under the heavy makeup and in her deep dark eyes. And her hair was still as raven-black and as sleekly arranged as it had been back in the halcyon days when this woman had rivaled Theda Bara and Nita Naldi and Clara Kimball Young . . .

"It was so good of you to come," Cecily was saying, holding out her hand. "You must forgive my seeming rudeness at the door. But my nerves are in a dither. However, any friend of dear Marcia's—"

Her words were for Miss Withers, but her attention was turned to Oscar Piper; he was a man. For a few seconds she was a faint echo of the Screen Vamp, the Sex Goddess of the Silver Screen, unquote. Quite evidently she expected the Inspector to kiss her hand, but he

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only held it for a second and then sheepishly dropped it.

Meanwhile Miss Withers was gathering impressions, as was her habit. This elderly, crippled old woman was in fear of her life; the schoolteacher could almost feel the fear, could almost smell it above Cecily's perfume.

"You must excuse the way the place looks," Cecily was saying, waving her hand vaguely. Indeed, the room was a jumble of untidiness. The tables, chairs, and even the mantlepiece suggested Christmas Eve in the family of a dozen or more small children: everything was piled high with toys, plus rolls of fancy wrappings, balls of varicolored string, and boxes of bright Santa Claus stickers. There was a stack of packages, wrapped and ready for mailing, in one corner.

"Christmas—in September?" said the Inspector, unbelieving.

"I'm afraid I went simply mad in your New York toy stores," admitted Cecily as she made ineffectual efforts to find them a place to sit. "I had such fun shopping before—before I got too scared to go out any more, even with dear Felicio pushing my wheel chair. But now, I really don't trust anybody!"

The Inspector was seated uneasily on the edge of a sofa and had taken out a fresh cigar, while Miss Withers prowled the room, the packages, the typewriter table. There were many scrapbooks, many old newsclips and photos of an earlier era. But what she was interested in was *now*.

"About this suicide next door—" the Inspector began.

"If indeed it *was* suicide," said Cecily Barth meaningfully.

"You didn't hear any sounds of a struggle, any raised voices?"

"No," admitted Cecily. "But there is an unused bathroom between, where I keep my cat's litterbox. Mr. Twill and I were working very closely together on the script, and we never locked the connecting doors. That would have made a fine scandal once upon a time, wouldn't it? But I'm afraid I wasn't here to notice anything yesterday afternoon; my cat had got out and down the hall and I was looking for him, as I often have to do when I can't get anybody to do it for me."

"Let's get down to cases," the Inspector went on firmly. "When did you last see Gary Twill?"

"Well, he brought in the last sequence of the script early in the morning, around eight o'clock. He'd worked on it all night, poor dear boy. Like most writers, he hated to make carbons and he always made a lot of typographic errors, so I had to type the final version of everything."

Cecily nodded toward the corner of the room, where there they saw a bridge table, a portable electric typewriter similar to the one used by Gary Twill, and several piles of white and yellow paper.

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"It wasn't actually as intimate and deep a collaboration as I had hoped it would be, but I'm still going to try for co-screenplay credit. The lovely TV residuals, you know! That's the payment to writers for re-runs, and it can go on for years." She beamed at them. "A sensational life story like mine will be released and re-released over and over again."

"You were satisfied with the script, then?" asked Miss Withers.

"More than satisfied! Gary had caught the spirit of the really great days of Hollywood. Such a dear brilliant man! I can't believe he took his own life."

"Who could have done it, then?" demanded Oscar Piper.

"Really, my dear man!" Cecily made a dramatic gesture. "How on earth should I know? I'm a stranger in town."

"'I a stranger and afraid, in a world I never made,'" said Miss Withers softly. Cecily was obviously winding the Inspector around her little finger, with a practiced charm that dated back two generations. The schoolteacher was less easily impressed. "You're quite sure you heard nothing in the next room yesterday afternoon, and that you were out chasing your kitten at the time Gary Twill died?"

"Quite sure."

"And you received Twill's version of the last sequence of the script about eight yesterday morning, and retyped it with carbons and then took it up to Mr. Abbas say around ten or ten thirty?"

"Exactly. Only I gave it to Jane, his confidential secretary. I can manage these automatic elevators very well, if I take my time. I told Jane that I was delighted with the script and that I would sign formal approval anytime—I have that right in my contract."

"And did you hear anything from Mr. Abbas yesterday?" the schoolteacher pressed.

"Nothing directly. I phoned Jane Roberts sometime after lunch to learn what the great man's verdict was, and she said he was still studying the script but that storm warnings were out. That didn't worry me; he's the sort of producer who never likes anything on paper in the first reading."

She broke off when there was a sudden interruption from the bedroom. What erupted was at first sight a rather furious battle between two small black kittens. The fracas moved into the drawing room—and then it turned out to be a mimic battle between one black kitten and one very naturalistic toy kitten, with the former naturally getting the upper hand—or upper paw. Then just as suddenly it was all over; the live kitten turned its back on the stuffed kitten-on-a-string, stalked over to Cecily, and leaped lightly into her lap.

"Asmodeus baby!" said Cecily Barth. She turned to her visitors. "I almost named him Lucifer—only

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then his nickname would have been 'Loose,' and I couldn't have that, could I?"

"We'll wait and see the film," said Miss Withers ironically, conscious that they weren't getting anywhere. "Miss Barth, I moved heaven and earth to get the Inspector to come up here with me and look into this affair, and all because of Marcia. But I don't think you're being altogether frank with us. We happen to know that you saw Gary Twill die. So you weren't chasing your kitten—you were looking out of your open window. A newsvendor in the street below looked up and saw two open windows—and then yours was swiftly closed. Right?"

If the sally was supposed to put Cecily into one of her dithers, it failed completely. "I wasn't going to admit that," the aged screen star said. "I just wanted to keep out of it. Yes, I had recovered Asmodeus, and I was sitting here and I heard the commotion. I did rush to the window and it was raining so hard I had to raise it to see anything—and I wish I hadn't."

She faced them defiantly, like an angry child caught with a hand in the cookie jar. But Miss Withers was thinking. This ridiculous old woman knew something which she was not prepared to disclose. It might be important, it might be minor. But it was something.

"What I am really interested in," said the schoolteacher, "is the bottle of champagne. The one Gary Twill went out to buy shortly before his death. But he didn't drink it as a sort of stirrup cup into Eternity, because the empty bottle wasn't found among the other empties. Can you help us there, Miss Barth?"

Cecily hesitated for a very long second, and then she smiled. "I thought that some things could be kept private," she said, as she put the black kitten gently down out of her lap. "All right, since you press me, I'll tell you."

She wheeled herself over to the hall closet and almost immediately reappeared with an unopened, gold-topped bottle of champagne in her hand. It was, Miss Withers noticed, of 1938 vintage—whether a good year or a bad year she didn't know. But that did not matter.

"A going-away present," Cecily explained. "Just like Gary."

"But no note with it?" pressed Miss Withers. "I know writers."

Cecily hesitated. "I don't know just when Gary left the bottle. It was in the connecting bathroom, just inside the door on my side. And since you make such a point of it—yes, there *was* a note."

Wheeling herself with a certain calculated dexterity, Cecily went over to the typewriter table and came back with a sheet of manuscript paper, which the Inspector and Miss Withers read as one.

"Cecily dear, the hell with everything. I am taking it on the lam

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(as we used to say in the old Cagney pictures) and getting outa here. Don't say it hasn't been fun, because it hasn't. Drink this in good health, and think of me as not one who is dead but just gone far away. (Quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, I think). Anyway, I have had it. Your affectionate collaborator, Gary."

It was the Inspector who spoke first. "Well, Hildegarde? You said you would be happier with an eyewitness or a suicide note. You now have the latter. Okay? Let's go somewhere and have dinner."

"Let's not," said Miss Withers, who was in a state of confusion but who had a little red light flashing on and off in the back of her brain. She faced Cecily. "You have, you know, been withholding evidence and in essence you have been resisting police officers in the performance of their duty and otherwise impeding justice. I am quite sure that Inspector Piper can find some grounds for having you held as a material witness in Women's Jail for a few days—"

"It might be a most interesting experience," said Cecily Barth. "But if he did something foolish like that to me—while Jane Roberts, who is the one person who actually might have had real animosity to Gary, goes free—well, Inspectors have become sergeants overnight. Or even sent to a beat over in Canarsie?"

The dear old lady had claws, it appeared. Longer than those of Asmodeus, (named after a minor demon) who now was purring contentedly in a chair. A live prop for an ageless actress who was determined always to be on stage . . . Cats, Miss Withers had observed, always had means of taking care of themselves.

"I think—" began Miss Withers. And then the telephone rang.

"I'm not supposed to have any phone calls," Cecily pouted. But she wheeled herself over to the instrument. "Yes?" Her voice changed into a dulcet tone. "Yes, Mr. Abbas?"

The voice at the other end was loud and emphatic; it could be heard across the room. "Cecily, mine darlink, ve got problem. Somebody making stink about that fool Twill. Some old dame who minds other people's business. So ve haf a conference here in de office at eight dis evening, right? All of us! So ve agree on our stories. Hokay?"

"I think I can arrange to be there," said Cecily. She hung up and turned back to her guests. "You perhaps heard," she said. "Mr. Abbas is disturbed at this reopening of the case. So he is calling a conference—"

"We know," said Miss Withers. "Things get more complicated all the time. And my best advice to you is—"

Just then the doorbell rang. Ce-

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cily wheeled herself over, put on the chain, then opened. Both Miss Withers and the Inspector caught a glimpse of a frightened girlish face through the crack.

"It's me—Lilith!" came the voice. "Miss Barth, I have to tell you something, but the switchboard girl won't ring you."

"Those were my personal instructions, dear. I—I'm not feeling well and I'm not seeing anybody or talking to—"

"But you don't understand!" the voice from the hall persisted. "We're all in trouble and the picture is in trouble. This whole thing is going to hell in a handbasket. Somebody is trying to reopen the mess and make out like Gary didn't kill himself! There's some old biddy rampaging around—she has some sort of *in* with the fuzz—and she's here only to try to make trouble. And any more bad publicity might frighten away Mr. Abbas' backers. So if anybody asks you, don't tell them about Gary and me—it was only a night or two anyway and all in the course of show business. Really, it doesn't count!"

"Yes, dearie," said Cecily calmly. "My lips are sealed."

"And another thing," said the voice through the crack in the door. "His Nibs wants us all up in the penthouse at eight tonight, for a sort of council of war. It's an ultimatum. We have to get our stories all straight or this picture isn't ever going to get made!"

"Roger—out and over," said Cecily. She closed the door and turned back to her uninvited guests. "You see what I mean?" she demanded a bit plaintively. "I just don't know how to cope with it all."

"You don't have to cope with it all by yourself, not now," said the schoolteacher. "But these are deep waters, and I feel there is more here than meets the eye, unquote." She gave the Inspector a signal, and they made their departure—with Asmodeus the black kitten making a determined but vain effort to go out with them.

"Well, Hildegarde?" said Oscar Piper as they approached the elevator. "Did you see anything I didn't see? I figure that was a genuine twenty-four carat suicide note, and —"

"And a genuine, twenty-four carat plane ticket, don't forget. Oscar, I'm afraid I can't take you up on that dinner invitation, I have other things to do. But I suggest that we both crash Mr. Abbas' party at eight."

"Well—if you say so. In for a nickel, in for a dime. Fine old dramatic tradition—to have all the suspects gathered together in one place, while the great Hawkshaw unravels the mystery. Only, in this case, I don't see any possible motive for murder."

"So then it might be an *impossible* motive," Hildegarde retorted. "I am not trying to be cryptic, Oscar. But a little red light is flashing on

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and off in the back of my head, a warning that perhaps I have missed something. And besides, I have an errand to do—some shopping, as it were."

"Not another hat—when I was just getting used to this one!"

"No, not a hat. Something more in the line of a toy, but a rather unusual toy." She nodded. "And now, if you will be kind enough to hail me a taxi, I'll be off. We'll meet here again in the lobby at eight o'clock, right?"

"Right or wrong, we'll meet," said the Inspector wearily.

The penthouse apartment-cum-office where the self-admittedly great Mr. Abbas lived and had his being was originally a magnificent (if now a somewhat rundown) center of operations. The drawing-room office, in which he was now having a supposedly secret conference with his employees, protégés, and disciples, was large enough for a tennis court or at least a badminton court; it had been furnished in 1932 Moderne—plenty of glass and everything in black and silver, with sharp angles.

The paintings were early imitations of Picasso, the books were sumptuously leather-bound copies of Mr. Abbas' scripts, the lighting was soft and slightly off-green. Miss Bixby loved it; Jane Roberts wished she had kept her date to go bowling; Lilith Lawrence thought belatedly that she should have taken up some other line of work. Hymie Rose sat beside his client and was chewing on an enormous but unlighted cigar. "He should get me out of here and find me some night-club bookings," Lilith was thinking.

But a TV picture was a TV picture, with audiences in the millions. One mustn't forget that. And it meant so much to dear old Cecily . . .

Abbas was speaking, as from the mountaintop. He was directing his diatribe at them all, but looking at Cecily in her wheel chair.

"Ve got troubles," said Mr. Abbas. "Troubles vith script and troubles vith publicity. Everybody here, including me myself, has goofed. But ve don't got to go on goofing. Don't any of you talk to no more reporters, understand? So vat is it if a fool bellboy suggests that maybe I trun—I trew—Gary Twill over the parapet? The script vas bad, but not dat bad. He musta kill himself, de no-goodnik."

Just then there was a shrill alarm from the doorbell, which Miss Bixby hastily arose to answer. And in came Felicio, smiling apologetically. "Sorry. Mr. Abbas—but he have badge and what am I to do?"

So Inspector Oscar Piper, followed closely by Miss Hildegarde Withers, joined the party, though very much uninvited. "As you were!" commanded the Inspector. "At ease! This isn't a pinch, yet." Again he flashed the persuasive gold badge.

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But the situation was obviously strained, and Miss Withers was, so to speak, up in arms. "We are gathered together," she began, "all of those who knew Gary Twill here in Manhattan, to try to find out how and why he died—"

"Everybody but Mr. Durkin," put in Cecily Barth softly. "A very nasty man."

"Thank you," said the schoolteacher. "Which gives me an idea." She winked to the Inspector, who frowned and then caught on. He stepped catlike to the door and threw it open, disclosing the house detective crouching outside.

"Come in and join the party," said Miss Withers. "I had a hunch you wouldn't want to miss this."

"I was only keeping tabs—" began Durkin defensively. Then he came sheepishly in.

"I shall continue," the schoolteacher said firmly. "But this is not a simple matter."

"Understatement of de year," put in Boris Abbas. "I resent—"

"Go ahead and resent," said Oscar Piper. "But shut up when the lady is talking."

"We have the case," continued Miss Withers as if in a classroom, "of an athletic, two hundred-pound man, in full possession of his faculties, who went to his death out of a hotel window. I discount the theory advanced by Felicio in one press interview that Gary Twill was hurled over the parapet by Mr. Abbas—"

"I do not really mean it—I am a writer of fiction!" cut in the bellboy hastily. "I let the imaginations run wild."

"Because that would have required premeditation and an accomplice down on the twenty-fourth floor to open Twill's window. So I eliminated Mr. Abbas."

The producer bowed.

"But may I see the script which you found so disappointing?" she went on. Abbas nodded to Jane, who got it from the files. As she continued, Miss Withers riffled through the neatly typed pages. "I also had to eliminate Mr. Hymie Rose, who though he possibly had motive, could hardly have thrown Gary Twill out of the window without creating a battlefield in the room."

"But if poor dear Gary had been sandbagged and was therefore unconscious?" suggested Cecily helpfully.

"He wasn't unconscious—he screamed all the way down. And pages of a manuscript went flying with him. I have one page of that manuscript which was rescued from the gutter and is still legible, and I note that it doesn't match the corresponding page just handed to me. On page 172, in the version Gary Twill took with him to his death, Cecily is playing a love scene in a garden with another Hollywood star of the time, one Norman Kerry—"

"Dat vas in the original outline!" cut in Abbas.

"And in the final version just

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given to me the scene is played with the Prince of Wales, no less! And later Cecily romances with Jack Dempsey and Charles Lindbergh and heaven knows who else!"

"Vich is vat makes me so infurious!" yelled Abbas. "How to get releases from such big names?"

"Let me explain," Cecily cooed. "I simply took a few liberties as I typed the final version and livened it up a bit. Who remembers dear Norman today? Now Edward, later King of England—"

"His intimates, I understand, always have called him by his real name, which is David," said the schoolteacher pedantically.

"I met him once at a party," Cecily said defensively. She looked like a child who had just been told there is no Santa Claus.

"To continue," said Miss Withers. "I once liked Mr. Durkin for the killer. He had left the police force under a cloud, and lived for a while in Los Angeles until the heat was off and he could come back and get this sinecure of a job as hotel security officer. If Twill had known him out west and learned of the old scandal, and if Mr. Durkin had been afraid that Twill would talk and cost him this job—"

"You're dreaming, Hildegarde," said the Inspector.

"I know. I was clutching at straws. But again we face the problem of why the window was open on a stormy, rainy day, and why there were no signs of a struggle. I had to come to the conclusion that this was not a strongarm job, to use the vernacular. Even though Jane Roberts here has obviously strong arms—"

"*And* the only real motive!" Cecily put in gleefully. "You should have heard them quarreling!"

"You bitch!" said sweet Jane, with feeling.

"I must confess that at one time I even considered Miss Barth herself as a suspect," continued Miss Withers.

"I wouldn't want to be ignored!" the old lady said happily. "This is the most exciting thing that's happened to me in years!" She was obviously enjoying every moment of it.

"But it's only in old B-movies that a supposed cripple suddenly arises from a wheel chair and performs deeds of mayhem and murder."

"I really am crippled," Cecily said sadly. "Look at my legs, once the most famous in Hollywood!" She lifted her skirt and displayed pitifully atrophied legs, like pipestems. "So if strong men couldn't have pushed poor dear Gary out of a window, how could poor little me?"

"Exactly. How could you?"

"So that seems to leave only me," spoke up the fair Lilith with some spirit. "But how on earth—"

"You could possibly have called his attention to something down in the street, and then—"

"But *why?* He played fair with

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me, I got the job. And since we are getting down to cases, I didn't just romance him for the job, I really went for him!" And Lilith gave Hymie Rose a defiant stare.

There was a silence. Then the Inspector coughed and murmured, "Well, Hildegarde? Having eliminated everybody, we come back to suicide."

"Not quite, Oscar. Not with that plane ticket." She turned back to Cecily Barth. "Cecily, you took liberties with Twill's script. Didn't you know he'd scream with rage and insist that Mr. Abbas read the correct version—if he was still around? And that your machinations would all go for nothing?"

Cecily was suddenly quiet.

"It may seem to some of you that this is an insufficient motive for taking a man's life. But the human ego is a strange thing—especially the Hollywood ego. Cecily, you convinced yourself that with Gary Twill out of the way you could talk Mr. Abbas here into using the more sensational version of your life story. True or false?"

The people in the big room were hardly breathing; you could have heard a soap bubble explode.

"Utter nonsense," said Cecily finally, in a small voice. "Granting for a moment what you say about the script, how could I, a ninety-pound cripple, throw a big strong man out of a window?" She finished on a high squeak of triumph.

"To make a long story longer," said Miss Withers almost sadly, "I suggest to you, as they say in British trials, that you worked out a clever and devilish scheme—playing on Gary Twill's good-hearted willingness to help you search for your kitten who was always getting out. You bought a life-like stuffed black kitten, which could easily have been mistaken for the real thing in a rainstorm, and with a cane or some other implement shoved it out on the ledge that runs beneath your room, the bathroom, and Twill's room. Then you rushed to him and asked him to try to reach out of his window and rescue it."

"Pure fantasy!" said Cecily. "I suppose I was right behind him in my wheel chair and gave him a superhuman shove? What jury would believe that?"

"I'm not quite through," Miss Withers said quietly. "I remembered that for years you've been an ardent worker for the Humane Society and the SPCA and kindred organizations, and that once you tried to lead a protest march against the Chicago stockyards. You had seen how they force cattle into the chutes. So you got an inspiration and you bought this."

From her capacious handbag the schoolma'am produced a Xmas-wrapped parcel, and slowly and dramatically unwrapped it. The article inside looked something like a large flashlight, with no bulb.

"What on earth is that?" demanded Oscar Piper.

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"It's known as a Shock Rod. At the stockyards it's called a cattle goad. Oscar, I don't suppose you would let me demonstrate, with you as the subject? I guarantee that if this instrument is applied to your anatomy you will automatically and involuntarily jump farther than you have ever jumped before."

"No, thanks," said Oscar Piper grimly.

Miss Withers pressed the button, and the Shock Rod buzzed like an angry rattlesnake. "Cecily, now we know why Gary Twill went out the window. And how can you explain why we found this nasty thing among the Christmas toys wrapped up for your grandnieces and grandnephews?"

"You didn't! You couldn't! I mailed it—" Then the ex-movie star realized what she had said.

Miss Withers and the Inspector had their spaghetti dinner after all, if a bit late. Over the zabaglione he suddenly frowned. "One thing bothers me. Oh, it's not the old woman; she won't stand trial—"

"Psychiatric care?" asked the schoolteacher.

"Some private place, with bars. For the rest of her days. No, I'm wondering how you got into her suite and found the gadget."

"But I didn't! I hunted all over town until I found a place where you can buy them, and I got some Christmas gift paper like Cecily's and wrapped it, figuring it would shock her into a confession. Shock treatment can work both ways, Oscar."

He grinned, and lifted his glass of Chianti. "To you, Hildegarde. Long may you wave!"

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Wasn't it G. K. Chesterton who asked, "Where hide a leaf?" And answered, "In a forest." Or "Where murder a man?" And answered, "In a battle" . . .

Robert Bloch goes further, much further—to the ultimate

THE MAN WHO NEVER DID ANYTHING RIGHT

by ROBERT BLOCH

HE CAME ON DUTY PROMPTLY AT ten o'clock.

Hanson was already waiting inside the door when he unlocked it, and Hanson was scowling.

"Late again," Hanson said. "I got a heavy date."

"But it's just ten now—here, look at my watch—"

Hanson brushed past him. "You never do anything right," he muttered. "Okay, into the cell, Shorty."

Hanson took the keys, locked him in, and went away.

And then he was alone in the room.

Hanson had called it a cell, and in a way it was. The room was too small, too hot, too bare. It had no windows, and the indirect lighting produced a constant glare. The only furniture was a table and one chair; there was no radio, no TV, nothing to read, not even a cot to rest on. He wasn't supposed to rest, of course: he was supposed to stay alert and wait for orders from the loudspeaker set high up in the wall.

That's all there was to it—just one hour of guard duty every night, from ten to eleven. All he had to do was wait for orders, and of course there never were any orders. It wasn't a hard assignment at all, but the button made him nervous.

It was just a small button, set in the wall under the loudspeaker. He could sit with his back to it if he liked and pretend it wasn't even there.

But it was there, and it made him nervous. One hour a night was about all he could take: one hour a night, sitting in that locked room with the little button.

The trick was to think about something else.

He sat down and reached for a cigarette, then remembered he didn't have any cigarettes. No smoking—that was one of the rules. No wonder Hanson had made that crack about it being a cell.

Maybe the routine was getting to Hanson too. Maybe he too was ready to flip. But no, Hanson wouldn't flip. He wasn't the flipping kind. Not handsome Hanson

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—that big ape, always talking about his heavy dates. He'd sure been in one hell of a hurry to get out tonight. And he'd had that nasty grin on his face, just as if he was still seeing Myrna.

But he wasn't, of course. Myrna wasn't Hanson's girl; she was *his* girl. She'd told him so last week, swore she was through with Hanson, said she'd given him the gate. From now on there'd be just the two of them, Myrna and himself.

And tonight, in just one hour, when he got out of here—

Then he remembered. Myrna had called and left a message for him. She couldn't see him tonight, she had a headache.

Headache. He had a headache, too. Particularly when he remembered Hanson's grin. Could it be that—?

No, she wouldn't doublecross him.

But Hanson would.

"You never do anything right," Hanson had said. And he'd grinned when he muttered it, grinned as though he had some kind of secret. He couldn't wait to lock him up, here in the cell.

"Okay, into the cell, Shorty."

Shorty. That was the part that really hurt.

Because he was short. He knew it, Hanson knew it, Myrna knew it.

But was it his fault he was a runt? Was that any excuse for being picked on, laughed at, tricked? He couldn't help being short any more than Hanson was responsible for being tall and good-looking. It wasn't fair.

He stood up, feeling the heat and the closeness in the little room. God, why didn't something happen? But there wasn't a sound. And he still had fifty minutes to go. Fifty minutes—that meant only ten minutes had passed. How could he stand it? How could he stand it, knowing that Hanson was out there, free? Hanson and Myrna, together, laughing at him in the cell, laughing at Shorty who never did anything right.

Think of something else, he told himself.

He found himself staring at the button.

The button, the small button in the wall.

He turned away, telling himself not to be nervous, to forget about the button. In a little less than fifty minutes he'd be out of here, he could phone Myrna, she'd tell him she loved him, and they'd laugh about his fears together.

Or was she laughing now? She and Hanson, together? Why try to fool himself—it was true, he was sure of it. That damned Hanson! He ought to be killed.

Think about that for a moment. Yes. Think about killing Hanson.

The trouble was, he couldn't. Because he was Shorty. And Hanson was big and strong. There would never be a chance; none of them was ever allowed access to weapons,

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for obvious security reasons. Besides, he had never used a gun or a knife. He'd bungle the job for sure. "You never do anything right."

So Hanson would go on living and laughing and loving, while Shorty stayed here locked in the cell with the little button.

If only there was some way to kill Hanson, some way to commit the perfect crime!

But he wasn't smart enough to figure out anything like that, and he wasn't big enough or brave enough to carry it through.

He paced the tiny room, cursing under his breath. Perfect crime! There was no such thing. No matter how cleverly one planned it, there could always be a slipup somewhere along the line. The only perfect crime is one that nobody can ever possibly know about.

That's when he stopped, standing in front of the button, standing and staring.

There was a way. A way in which he could kill Hanson and nobody would ever know. Because nobody would ever be *left* to know.

He stood there for a moment, staring at the button, seeing it up close for what it really was. A little round world. But that didn't matter, as long as Hanson died.

He reached out, pressed

Ending of STORY WITHOUT AN ENDING

by JUAN PAGE

(conclusion to page 115)

"The question . . . is one not to be lightly considered, and it is not for me to presume to set myself up as the one person able to answer it. And so I leave it with all of you: Which came out of the opened door—the lady, or the tiger?" *

*These last lines appeared in Century Magazine as long ago as November 1882. They are, of course, the last paragraph of Frank R. Stockton's great and justly famous story, *The Lady, or the Tiger?*.

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There is a particular fascination about a murder set against the background of a school. It was Vincent Starrett, we believe, who once said that he had never read a really bad mystery story with a school locale. Perhaps it's the academic atmosphere or the characters who seem perpetually young . . . Here is an especially good "school mystery"—but even so, it is the father-daughter, detective-student relationship that is so humanly appealing, so appealingly human . . .

THE TURNING POINT

by JACQUELINE CUTLIP

THE MEN STOOD FOR A WHILE, staring down at the body, and then turned to climb back up the hollow in the pale light of the spring morning. They hurried a little, not speaking, their faces dirty with strain and exhaustion.

All through the long warmish night their lights had clawed back and forth in the dark hills beyond the campus. Until the last they had held hope it was only a prank of some sort, that Jill Finley had simply walked away without permission and might return at any moment to ask what the fuss was all about. It was the season for such things, a few days before the Easter holidays were to begin; and the Virginia countryside was spangled with flowers and new grass. Only the Sheriff, who had known the girl, felt in some vague, indefinable way that she was dead.

The discovery was finally made by chance. Someone glimpsed a splash of color in the laurel thicket at the bottom of the old quarry, a color so alien it had no business being there. They worked toward it, like pins edging in to some dreadful magnet, and found her lying on her back with her neck twisted oddly to one side. She looked, for one so dead, absurdly peaceful. The vivid dress was neatly in place, and a matching scarf covered the incredibly red hair.

Sheriff Charles Macklyn stared silently down into the empty eyes, wondering what it was about the corpse that troubled him, that caused the small nagging fretfulness in the back of his mind. During his twenty years as Sheriff he had become inured to death and its more violent forms, but he couldn't recall anything quite like this. The face had remained exquisitely perfect; nothing marred the fine, delicate features that had made the girl Prom Queen, Miss Valentine, that had given her all the other honorary designations reserved only for

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the extremely beautiful. There was no fixed glaze of fear or shock. Yet the translucent skin seemed to have acquired a curious ruddiness—almost, he thought, like that seen on victims of carbon monoxide.

The Sheriff knelt and expertly lifted first one bare arm and then the other. Near both shoulders were two shadowy smudges, like palm prints. He got up slowly, with something like a chill wind blowing across his heart. It had come to him that it might easily have been his own daughter lying there in the heavy dew. Kathy had attended classes with Jill Finley, had been her friend. He felt a sudden uncontrollable longing to see Kathy, to call the school and make certain she was still there, and safe.

Instead, he stood with the others, gazing up at the sheer wall of rock looming eighty feet above them. Even without the bruises it was unlikely this was an accident. A knee-high rustic rail guarded most of the precipice, and warning signs were posted along the narrow trail snaking up to it. On top was a grove of tall lacy elms through which, on a clear day, one could see the blue-hazed mountains of three states.

Despite this brilliant, dizzying view, its very danger precluded popularity. Too many heads of straying cattle had blundered over the edge. Too many bird dogs, drunk with the scents of grouse and quail, had ignored the rail. And still, although it was off-limits to the students at the junior college, it had earned a reputation as Lovers' Lane, as a trysting place.

Macklyn was fully aware that Jill Finley, from all accounts, was one of the "fun" girls. Meeting her once with Kathy, he had disliked her on sight. It wasn't just the fiery hair or the husky suggestive voice. Nor even, he was forced to admit, the way the expensive clothes clung to her slight body. That was the way they all talked now, the way they dressed, and one accepted it with a kind of weary tolerance. It was because he had seen in the tilted eyes what Kathy in her innocence had never seen—that this seventeen-year-old, this child-woman, was a predator, a troublemaker. He had listened with alarm as the two girls spoke of graduation, of an apartment in New York where they could do something exciting, like modeling or acting.

Afterward, Kathy laughed at his consternation.

"Jill isn't nearly as hippy as she looks. It's only that she's had this crazy childhood when everyone ignored her, and now she demands attention."

It was a bewildering, illogical explanation, but he let it pass. Lately, if he tried to talk to Kathy, she would move away uneasily, as if warning him not to pry. So he had managed to forget Jill Finley, as one does a temporarily arrested illness, until Rachel Horne called from the college, asking him to come at once.

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He knew Rachel well—had, in fact, at one time seriously considered marrying her. Their courtship was fraught with tiresome stumbling blocks: her appointment as dean, his mother's invalidism, his own subliminal wariness. It had developed into nothing more than a pleasant, rather sterile friendship, yet they were still comfortable in the presence of one another. For this reason, perhaps, Rachel made no effort to conceal her worry.

"The bed was slept in, but she didn't come down to breakfast," she said urgently. "And don't suggest suicide, Charles. Jill's as melodramatic as they come, but she wouldn't go that far. Her mother, who's just shed her fourth husband, will be here tomorrow to take her on a cruise. Jill's talked of nothing else since Christmas. Her suitcases have been packed for days."

"Boys?" he asked, and saw Rachel frown.

"Naturally. One in particular of late—John Hagen, who seems to be the current fad. All the girls are wild about him. You may have heard Kathy mention him." He glanced up at that, but she went on so smoothly he was certain he'd imagined the guardedness in her voice. "He's the dark, Heathcliffish type who comes back in style about every ten years. Works at a garage in town. Recently won a scholarship to a university, and in poor Jill's rather limited sight that makes him a genius. I called him and he swears he hasn't seen her. I'm inclined to believe him."

We'll see, Macklyn thought, and made a mental note of the name. "What's missing from her room? How much money did she take with her?"

"Nothing is missing." His brows lifted, and she met his gaze. "I mean that literally, Charles. Her roommate has gone over every inch of the closet, and she says nothing is gone—no money, no clothes, not even a lipstick. All her things are packed, and the skirt and sweater she left out to wear have been accounted for. It sounds incredible, but it's true."

They had then gone to the dormitory to see the roommate, a frail, plain girl who sat on the bed in quiet despair, her eyes ugly from weeping. Macklyn was so appalled by her misery that he attempted to be offhandedly cheerful in his questioning, but she would not be consoled. Jill would never just run away, she insisted doggedly; something had happened to her. She assured him that Dean Horne was correct: with the exception of a pair of flat shoes, nothing at all was missing from Jill's closet, not even a handkerchief.

She was wrong, of course, he thought now. And if it hadn't been for the vivid dress worn by the dead girl, the body might have lain in the undergrowth for months . . .

On the way back to town he stopped at the school to tell Rachel,

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saying only that it was apparently an accident. He avoided her stunned face, for he did not lie well. She took it well enough, he decided, considering it would be her task to inform the arriving mother that she would be making arrangements for a funeral instead of a bon voyage party.

When he got back to his office in the courthouse he sent a man for Johnny Hagen. As an afterthought he called Rachel and said he'd like to talk to the roommate again. He managed to shave, and then sat down at his desk to drink coffee while he waited.

Something in his blood, some pricking of the thumbs, told him the boy was behind it. Maybe the girl was pregnant; it happened nearly every month. Hagen, mindful of the scholarship, could have pushed her from the cliff in a moment of blind panic. Remembering the peculiar flush of the skin, Macklyn thought it conceivable that the kid had probably given her enough carbon monoxide to render her unconscious.

He picked up the telephone and called the coroner. When he was finished he leaned back wearily. However it had happened, he wished it hadn't been here, in his town. It was small and old, depending almost exclusively on the school and a few tourists for its life, twilit with the memories of another, gentler century.

He twisted his chair deliberately so that his back was to the windows. He did not like spring. It was on such a day as this that his wife had left him and an infant Kathy, fleeing to some far state with a more remarkable man. During the winters he seldom thought of her. But in April, with the scent of peach-bloom streaking the air and the new moon working its magic, he was assailed by a nagging restlessness.

A big man, at twenty he had been one of those gangling shy youths whose amiable faces sometimes lure others into believing they possess neither great ambitions nor deep emotions. He was fully aware that this deception had ruined his private life. Yet oddly, it served him well in his job.

It served him so well that there were those who hinted he could go much further if he chose—as far, perhaps, as the state capitol. He didn't choose, he told them flatly. He liked living in this quaint clean town in his big white house, seeing his daughter on week-ends and knowing that she was being cared for and growing up in a place where riots and switchblades were only words read in a city newspaper.

His mother, during her final sickness in the autumn, had begged him to marry again. Kathy, she pointed out, would not stay with him much longer. This angered him, for he knew in advance, without ever having suffered it, the pain of Kathy's going.

There were footsteps in the hall,

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and his deputy brought in Hagen and the roommate. Someone, he could tell, had already told them that Jill Finley was dead. The girl's face was pinched and bleak in its grief. The boy, dark, thin, and far too quiet, kept his head down.

Purposely he put them on the scarred yellow-oak bench directly in front of him. He began to speak courteously, feeling his way, for long ago he had learned the value of patience when dealing with guilt. It was far more prudent to inch one's way, to shatter composure with persistence, than to blunder ahead recklessly with a move that led nowhere. He was swept with the certainty that one of them, maybe both, knew something. It was only a question of which one would make the first mistake.

Hagen, Macklyn decided. He looked haunted, scared. He admitted having dated Jill Finley a few times, but then he'd dated others before and after, so it didn't mean anything. No, he hadn't seen her for a while, and no, they hadn't quarreled.

Suddenly something in the sullen face struck a chord in Macklyn's memory. He had seen Hagen before, recently, in his own home. Macklyn came in from work one Saturday afternoon and opened the front door to find the living room carpeted with Kathy's friends. It wasn't unusual, although she normally told him beforehand of such things, and he'd worked up a smile.

Then, from the room beyond, had come the incredibly intricate music of a guitar played in the classical way, a sound much like that of an ancient harp. Startled, he recognized a minuet by Mozart that he hadn't heard in a decade. He went to stand in the archway, searching for the player. It was Hagen.

Crouching over the instrument like a goblin on its hob, he'd glanced up at Macklyn with a slow, cool stare, and instantly the spell was shattered. The music slid slyly into the maddening thump of a "pop" lament, and Macklyn had snatched up his hat and fled. It was almost as though, he thought gloomily, the whole bunch of them lived some sort of secret life that brooked no intrusion from an adult, no matter what his authority.

Knowing that Kathy was even faintly acquainted with Hagen sent an arrow of fear lancing through him. His mother had chidingly said once that if it were possible he would build a protective moat around himself and what was his. Yet he was right, he told himself fiercely. This proved it. The Hagens and Jill Finleys should have been kept out.

There was a soft movement from Caroline Jacobs, the roommate, and Macklyn studied her. Small, prim, with doll's feet planted neatly together on the oiled floor. Tan hair hanging in a straight skein down her back; almost old-fashioned.

A quiet one, Rachel had said.

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Brilliant, really, with an exceptionally high IQ. And she had idolized Jill Finley. The only new information she could give him now was that Jill had been moody of late, which was unlike her.

The rain interrupted noisily, coming down savage and heavy. Macklyn hoped they had the girl inside by now. He didn't like to think of the slim beautiful body being beaten into the sodden ground.

Playing for time, he got up and strolled to the windows. In another hour reporters would be nipping at his heels, doggedly inquisitive and far too smart to accept the "accident" theory. He decided to push it a little.

"Jill Finley didn't fall from that cliff accidentally," he said without turning. "If either of you knows anything about it, you'd better tell me now."

The rain made angry patches of sound in the stillness. Then there was a sharp intake of breath. Just one, and Macklyn was not surprised. The other, whichever it was, already knew.

"Can't I go now, Sheriff Macklyn?" the girl said at last, and her voice was ragged. "Jill's mother will be coming, and I think I should be there."

Macklyn shrugged. There was no tangible reason to keep her, not when the boy was obviously the key. But as he turned, in the fraction of a heartbeat, he saw their glances lock, like those of duelists, and it bothered him. "Just another few minutes, Miss Jacobs," he said easily, "and I'll have someone drive you back."

"Look," the boy exploded desperately. "*I* had nothing to do with all this. I'm sorry as hell that Jill's dead, but *I* didn't do it. I've got a job to get back to, and I've told you everything I know."

"Everything, Johnny?" Caroline Jacobs said. There was something contemptuous in the faint smile she wore and Hagen whirled on her, a frightened sickness on his thin face.

"Shut up. *Shut up.*"

There was such violence in the repetition of the command that Macklyn felt a faint stir of optimism. It was only a matter of time now.

"I want to go," Caroline Jacobs said, getting up and smoothing her skirt. Macklyn saw with a start that her haggardness was gone. She looked composed now, almost stony. "Actually, you have no legal right to detain me. If you want to know anything more about Jill, you'd better ask your daughter. They were the best of friends—until Johnny came along."

Her words fell with a soft, chilling weight. Macklyn had the feeling of being struck across the back of the neck, a blow that froze his brain and distorted his vision. He waited a moment and then demanded quietly, "Explain that."

"Certainly." She laughed, and in his ears the sound was as treacherous as the first ice of winter. "Jill

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had a date with Johnny yesterday morning. On the cliff. When Kathy found out she came to our room and argued with Jill. She threatened to follow them, and for all I know, she did." She paused, watching Macklyn with vixenish eyes. "I heard it all."

"Keep Kathy out of this," Hagen said, and the pleading note in his choked voice struck Macklyn numb with fear.

"Noble Johnny," Caroline Jacobs mocked softly. "But it's no secret, Sheriff. Ask anyone. Kathy came between them." She was lying, Macklyn told himself frantically. She had to be! Yet the twisted thread of possibility was there, and he couldn't ignore it.

Blindly he went out into the hall and sent a deputy to the school for Kathy, ignoring the man's blank expression of bewilderment. He sat down heavily, like a man in shock, not able to look at the two on the bench, not daring to think ahead.

When the door opened at last, he didn't glance up. He knew the face, that fresh pink and white scrubbed look, as well as he knew his own. Her short black hair would be neatly flipped at the ends. The eyes that were too wide-set for true beauty would meet his gravely.

"They told me about Jill," she said, and there was something so sadly mature in her tone that he had to lift his head. In the red suede jacket, with the inevitable purse clutched to her, she might have been ten again. If, at that moment, he had possessed the power to make her ten again, he would have done it. "We had a fight, Daddy. Now we'll never be able to make up."

Stop! he wanted to warn her. But all he said was, "Kathy, please."

It had all happened too quickly, he thought despairingly, this turning point, this business of growing away from him. Looking at her now, he caught only a fleeting shadow of the child she had been. There was no going back now, no chance of recapturing the sunlit hours when they had allayed the loneliness of each other.

"Miss Jacobs—" the name seemed to clog his breathing—"Miss Jacobs claims you meant to follow Jill and Hagen to the cliff. Is that true?" He aimlessly rearranged his desk top, praying she would deny it.

Kathy hesitated. Her gray eyes wandered to the bench for the first time, speeding blankly past the girl, locking with the boy's. They stared at each other as though absorbed in some private happiness which cut them off from the chaos around them.

"It wasn't an accident," Macklyn said loudly. "She was pushed. There were bruises on her shoulders."

She came back to him slowly, blinking. "You don't think *I* did it, do you?" Strangled by panic, he couldn't answer. "I didn't."

She *had* to be telling the truth. Sometime during this feverish spring she had strayed from him,

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but the years spent rearing her, those careful, cautious years, had surely not been wasted. She would not lie to him.

"All right," he said more calmly. "Yet you did quarrel. About what?"

"I'm sorry," she said stiffly. "I can't tell you."

"Why?" he asked in an agony of frustration. Was Hagen this important to her?

"You'll have to trust me," she went on stubbornly. And then, as an afterthought, "You *do* trust me, don't you?"

He asked himself the question. He always had, he decided. It was only of late, with this subtle blossoming, that she had become withdrawn. "Sit over there with the others," he said roughly.

She regarded him steadily, and then sat down obediently next to the boy. Hagen mouthed her name mutely and reached for her hand. It was a particularly youthful gesture, and they sat like two forlorn children waiting for someone to come for them. The Jacobs girl slid away instinctively, her eyes blurred with something which might have been pain.

Kathy's in love, Macklyn thought incredulously; with this grease monkey, this cocky, hungry-looking kid. He had always known it would happen. It was one of those things he had intended to prepare for in some way, to arm himself. Yet as he watched helplessly, he was lashed with the fear that no matter who was responsible for the Finley girl's death, he had lost Kathy as surely as he had lost her mother.

In the thickening shadows of the wet afternoon Hagen stood up. "Let them go," he said. "I did it. I pushed Jill off the cliff."

Macklyn stared at him, suffering a violent, uneasy kind of hope. No, it couldn't be this easy. It never was. But the boy kept standing there, his arms dangling at his sides. Macklyn stabbed at a button under his desk.

"Take Hagen into the other room," he said to the deputy who appeared in the doorway. "And see that Miss Jacobs gets back to the college."

When they were gone and he was alone with Kathy, he found he could not speak. There was so much to say, and seeing her cowed like this, hands lying limply in her lap, all he felt was a nameless, intolerable ache.

"You heard him," he said at last.

"Yes." Her voice was as lifeless as her face.

"Does he mean anything to you?"

"If you're asking am I in love with him, I'm not sure."

Macklyn didn't know if that was what he meant or not; after all, one didn't actually love a magnet. And that was all Hagen was. "If you're young enough, you can love anyone," he said. "You should be careful, though. It's like cutting a pattern. You love again and again, another just like the first."

She looked up curiously. "Is that

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it, Daddy? Are you so terrified of getting someone like mother that you can't feel anything for anyone? Not even a person as decent as Rachel? I've wondered about that."

He sat back, stunned. She was far, far wiser than he'd dreamed. "Listen," he said grimly. "I'm responsible for your future. I've had more heartbreak than a dozen, and I want you to benefit from that. Can't you understand?"

"Still, everyone has to acquire his own experience, don't you think? I mean, it isn't something that's passed along from generation to generation, like family silver."

He spread his hands in silent defeat. A woman sat before him, and she had found a woman's answer. "If Hagen is telling the truth, and you're involved in any way, we'll both be ruined."

Kathy nodded. "I realize that. Only he didn't do it. He had no reason. They only dated two or three times."

"Why?" he demanded. "She was popular, beautiful."

"That was the trouble, I guess," she said soberly. "Those kind aren't much for long walks and sitting on the dorm steps. They want to go places, do things. Johnny doesn't have the money for that kind of entertainment."

"Money isn't required for the sort of entertainment that goes on at the top of the cliff," he said cruelly, and saw her flinch.

"It wasn't like that," she said. "I would have *known*. Johnny only said what he did because he was afraid I might have done it."

The fear was back, enormous and overpowering. "Let's begin again," he said, trying to keep the fear out of his voice. "With the quarrel."

Sitting in obstinate silence, she finally said, "It was about Johnny—a personal thing. Caroline had no right to repeat what she heard. It's her petty way of getting even."

"Even?"

"It's fairly complicated. I've always thought Caroline was crazy about Johnny, although she'd never admit it. Then, I guess, she figures I came between Jill and him, which isn't true."

"She says it is. She'll get up in a courtroom and swear to it, if it comes to that. Why?"

Kathy considered for a moment.

"Because Jill believed it, I suppose. You'd have to see it to understand what I mean. At parties and dances, even in class, everywhere Jill went, you'd see Caroline trotting frantically at her heels, like someone trying to catch the coattails of a comet."

Macklyn pondered this. He'd seen it before—the beautiful ones, lavished so generously with admiration and love, and the plain ones who traveled in their wake, hoping that some of the magic would rub off on them.

"Jill used Caroline," Kathy said. "She borrowed money from her, copied her homework, let her do her laundry. Degrading things."

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Perhaps, he thought, the lady-in-waiting had become disenchanted with her queen. But Kathy's next words denied this.

"Caroline might have lied and cheated for Jill, but she would never hurt her."

"Then we're back to the night you went to Jill's room."

"Yes." She got up and went to stand at the windows, her back to him. "Johnny hadn't seen her for a week or so. Everything was fine until Jill saw Johnny and me together and saw a chance to play the woman betrayed. She began calling Johnny at the garage, and his boss finally told him if it didn't stop he'd have to let him go. Johnny couldn't afford that—he needs every penny for school this fall." She whirled defiantly. "He's going to teach mathematics. You wouldn't think that of him, would you?"

No, Macklyn thought guiltily; a shoe clerk, a racetrack tout, maybe, but never a teacher.

"He begged her not to do it any more, but she did, the afternoon before she died. She made a big production of it, saying she had to see him one more time, and he said no. He was terribly afraid she might come to the garage and cause trouble. When he told me, I went to her and tried to reason with her." She stopped, blinking rapidly.

"And Caroline?"

"She was there," Kathy said bitterly. "She was *always* there, like a chair, or a stack of books. I just didn't notice her. Jill said if I could persuade Johnny to meet her on the cliff the next day before class, she'd leave him alone. I told her only if I could be there too." Shame stained her pale cheeks. "It wasn't jealousy. It's just that I knew her too well. I didn't want her to be able to say anything later that would keep Johnny from getting the scholarship."

Macklyn waited, forcing her to go on.

"She insisted she had to see him alone. By this time I was sick of the whole mess, and I agreed. I called Johnny at his rooming house and told him he'd better see her the next morning before he went to work."

"On the cliff," Macklyn said softly, almost happily.

"Everyone goes there. It's the only really private place left." She stopped, appalled by what she had said. "He didn't do it, Daddy. He overslept, and when he got there, he didn't see anyone."

Kathy, Kathy, he wanted to say, go back to school. Go back to your small pink room with its stuffed tiger and Beatle records. Slip back into childhood for just a little longer. Until this is over and I have dealt with Hagen.

"You think he did it, don't you?" she said thinly. "You *want* it to be him."

The telephone rang, cutting through the constraint. It would be the coroner.

"Your notion was all wild,

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Charles," the remote voice said. "No trace of monoxide. Not pregnant. *Virgo intacta*, in fact. Perfect health. Nothing at all but the neck. And those two bruises, of course."

He put the receiver back slowly, not meeting Kathy's eyes. So he'd been wrong about Jill Finley. Was it possible, then, that he was wrong about Hagen?

He got up, stumbling on cramped legs. Outside, the shadows had lengthened and he could see clumps of people gathered on Main Street, talking in low voices of what had happened. "Go, Kathy," he said heavily. "Tell one of the men to take you through the back way."

"Couldn't I wait here?" she asked, gazing at the bench. She had waited there before, often sleeping until he finished his work and took her home. But that was long ago, a never-to-come-again time. "I have to know what happens to Johnny."

"No!" The word seemed to pierce her, and she picked up her purse and walked to the door. A weary sob escaped, and she took a crumpled tissue from her pocket and blew her nose. It was a gesture that made Macklyn want to reach out and touch her, but he restrained himself.

It was as she had said: one had to suffer his own experiences. She, Hagen, Caroline Jacobs—none of them seemed to comprehend the enormity of what had happened. "What am I supposed to do?" he called after her. "Turn him loose so he can do it again? To you, or someone else he grows tired of?"

She shook her head wearily. "He didn't do it."

"He admits he did. And you're forgetting the girl downstairs in the morgue. What about her?" His voice grew cold and impersonal. "Jill Finley went to that cliff yesterday in her pretty pink dress, to meet Johnny Hagen. They argued or fought, and she went over. A good lawyer might get him off with manslaughter, but if I have anything to say, it'll be premeditated murder."

Kathy turned like an automaton and came back to the desk.

"Not pink, Daddy. Surely you're wrong about that."

"What do you mean?"

"Jill's hair, remember? It wasn't auburn or chestnut. It was the color of carrots. We used to call her Orphan Annie to make her mad. She'd never wear pink. She *couldn't*." She stopped, biting at her lip, and then said thoughtfully, "It must have been my new shift, with the matching scarf. Jill was with me when I bought it a few weeks ago. She liked it so well she had the shop order one for her in green. I guess she came into my room and got it while I was sleeping."

Macklyn felt himself floundering. "Why should she do such a thing?"

Kathy shrugged. "Why not? We all do it—borrow each other's clothes, I mean. And hers were all packed except for an old thing she wore around the dorm."

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"Why didn't she borrow something from her roommate?"

Kathy gave a little laugh. "You've seen Caroline. She's a seven, which is pretty small. Jill and I are both twelves. And it was called cyclamen, Daddy. Not pink."

He stared at her, something scratching in a corner of his mind.

"Almost everything I own is at the cleaner's," she went on. "Jill must have felt awful when she saw that the shift was the only decent thing left. She wouldn't have taken it if there had been anything else. When she tried it on in the shop, it did terrible things to her complexion."

It came to Macklyn then. He knew why the girl had looked so ghastly lying there at the bottom of the cliff. It was the vividness of the dress, its purplish tone reflecting onto the pallid skin that was forced to repulse the alien color even in death. He felt the old familiar excitement of the next-to-the-last piece of puzzle sliding into place.

"This pink—cyclamen shift. Were there many others around?"

"None that I know of. Most people can't wear that shade."

He hadn't known. It was only one of the many things he hadn't known. "Did you really tell Jill you meant to go to the cliff too?"

"I wouldn't have gone," she said, looking at him with direct candor, and he believed her. But Caroline Jacobs had thought Kathy would go. If she had wakened to find Jill gone, it was possible that she might, for some perverse reason of her own, have decided to follow her. At that hour she could easily have slipped away without being seen.

Macklyn leaned back, suddenly drained of strength. He could almost see the girl in the vivid dress, standing with her knees braced against the rail, staring out to where the sun was beginning to splinter across the mountains, wondering why the boy hadn't come. Her back would have been to anyone coming up the spiral path.

It might have been Kathy waiting there—Kathy's dress and the matching scarf concealing the flaming telltale hair.

Kathy was watching him, and somehow read his thoughts.

"Could she really hate me that much?" Her voice was puzzled, and abruptly she began to cry, clutching her face with her hands. Macklyn gazed blindly into space, asking himself the same question. It wouldn't have been hate, exactly. A psychiatrist had told him once that there was a black side to every mind, where seeds of madness lie dormant, needing only a certain turn of events to make them flourish. A thing such as this would be difficult to prove. He had a feeling that Caroline Jacobs' fragility was only gossamer camouflage for a groundwork of steel.

"I'll take you back," he said, giving Kathy his hand. "I'll need Rachel for this." He'd needed her, he

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realized with a start, for longer than he'd dreamed.

When they opened the door a slight figure at the end of the corridor turned from the rain-smeared windows and moved toward them like some gray wraith that had drifted up from the wet courtyard.

"All right," Caroline Jacobs said tonelessly. "I'll tell you what really happened up there. Not because I care what happens to that clod, Hagen. Or to your daughter, for that matter. But I'm not a fool. I know all about polygraphs and sodium pentothal, and I don't want anyone getting things twisted."

Her arms were clamped to her sides, and Macklyn had the sensation that if he were to move an inch she would flee. He stopped in his tracks, gripping Kathy's elbow.

"I don't know why I went to the cliff. Jill was so miserable over that stupid boy, and when I woke and found her gone, I guess I panicked. All I could think of was that she was crazy enough to jump, to cause a scene if nothing else. When I got there I didn't see her, and I didn't see him. But I saw Kathy. The leaves were damp beneath my feet, and she didn't turn. I kept thinking how nice it would be if Kathy were gone, and how easy it would be to walk up behind her and shove. I mean, I would never have gone to the trouble of *shooting* Kathy, or anything like that. It was just that she was there, and it was so *convenient.*"

She kept looking blankly over their heads.

"It was Kathy I pushed. Kathy. You have to understand that. How do you think I felt when I came back to the dorm and passed her in the hall? How do you think I felt!"

Macklyn took one of the stiff arms, expecting to be repelled in some way. It was only a small thin arm, a child's arm, and it had committed a mad, childish folly. Rachel's bright one hadn't matured emotionally. He wondered why, in all her wisdom, Rachel had failed to see the signs.

At the same time he knew that Kathy, who stood by his side in stunned compassion, had put her feet on the right path in spite of him. She was right. Life was filled with risks, and it came to him that while the overcautious may never lose anything, neither do they gain.

"Will they let him go?" Kathy asked.

He studied her for a long moment, memorizing the face, the look, the quiet perception. She would go from him, as she must, but not far. It was only the turning point. "Wait until I get back, and I'll go with you to tell him."

He wouldn't apologize; it wasn't in him. But Hagen, like Kathy and all the rest, had an uncanny instinct for sensing who was for them and who was against them. During this long long day bridges had been burnt. The boy, somehow, would know.

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a contemporary Gothic by

CELIA FREMLIN

first publication in the United States

What are the ingredients of the contemporary Gothic story now so popular again? Anthony Boucher has suggested the genre name of Gothica (partly because most of the new Gothics are written, or supposedly written, by women); an alternate name possibility might be Romantica; and Michael Avallone has described the new vintage as "tales of doom" requiring "three essentials of story design: (1) damsel in distress; (2) atmosphere and mood; and (3) the menace of the old versus the new."

Surely Celia Fremlin's "From the Locked Room Upstairs" qualifies on all counts: it has a woman in distress, atmosphere and mood, and the menace of the old versus the new. It has, too, the expected and necessary old house—rickety, decrepit, derelict; but most important, it has the enormity of terror and the insignia of twisted malice so indispensable to a Gothic tale, old or new . . .

FROM THE LOCKED ROOM UPSTAIRS

by CELIA FREMLIN

A DOOR BANGED IN THE EMPTY FLAT upstairs.

Margaret felt her fingers tighten on the covers of her library book, but she refused to look up. As long as she could keep her eyes running backward and forward along the lines of print, she could tell herself that she hadn't given in to her fear—to this ridiculous, unreasoning fear that had so inexplicably laid hold of her this evening.

What was there to be afraid of, anyway? Simply that the upstairs flat had been empty all this week, and that Henry was on duty tonight? But she had often been alone before—if you could call it alone, with Robin and Peter in bed in the very next room. Two little boys of six and eight sound asleep in bed can't really be called company, but still . . .

Leonora hesitated, wondering which way she should turn.

Margaret realized that she was still reading the same sentence, over and over again, and she shut the

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book with an angry little slam. What *was* the matter with her? Was it that murder in the papers—some woman strangled by a poor wretch who had been ill-treated in his childhood? He had a grudge against women, or something—Margaret hadn't followed it very carefully—had locked himself in an empty room in this woman's house, and then, in the middle of the night, had crept out . . .

All very horrid, of course; but then one was always reading of murders in the papers—anyway, they'd probably caught him by now. Now, what had she better do to put these silly ideas out of her head once and for all?

Go upstairs, of course. Go upstairs to the empty flat, look briskly through all the rooms, shut firmly whichever door it was that was banging, and come down again, her mind set at rest. Simple.

She put her book down on the little polished table at her side. But why was she putting it down so softly, so cautiously? Margaret shook herself irritably. There wasn't the slightest need to be quiet. Nothing ever seemed to wake the boys once they were properly off, and poor deaf old Mrs. Palmer on the ground floor certainly wouldn't be troubled.

Just to convince herself, she picked the book up again and dropped it noisily on the table. Then, with a firm step, she walked out to the landing.

The once gracious staircase of the old house curved down into complete blackness. For a moment Margaret was taken aback. Even though old Mrs. Palmer was often in bed before ten, she always left the hall light on for the other tenants—perhaps, too, for her own sake, from a deaf woman's natural anxiety not to be shut away in darkness as well as silence.

Margaret stood for a moment, puzzled. Then she remembered. Of course; the poor old thing had gone off this morning on one of her rare visits to a married niece. Tonight the downstairs flat was empty too.

Margaret was annoyed to feel her palms growing sticky as she gripped the top of the bannisters, peering down into the darkness. What on earth difference did it make whether Mrs. Palmer was there or not? Even if she was there, she would have been asleep by now, deep, deep in her world of silence, far out of reach of any human voice . . . of any screams . . .

Snap out of it, girl! Margaret scolded herself. This is what comes of reading mystery stories in the evening instead of catching up with the ironing as I meant to! She turned sharply round and walked across the landing to the other staircase—the dusty, narrower staircase that led to the empty flat above.

The hall stairs were in bad enough repair, goodness knew, but these were worse. As Margaret

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turned the bend which cut her off from the light of her own landing, she could feel the rotten plaster crumbling under her hand as she felt her way up in the darkness.

The pitter-patter of plaster crumbs falling onto the stairboards was a familiar enough sound to Margaret after six months in this decrepit old house; but all the same she wished the little noise would stop. It seemed to make her more nervous—to get in the way of something. And it was only then that she realized how intently her ears were strained to hear some sound from the empty rooms overhead.

But what sound? Margaret stood on the top landing listening for a moment before she reached out for the light switch.

Bother! The owners, who in all these months had never raised a finger to repair rotting plaster, broken locks, and split window frames, had nevertheless bestirred themselves in less than a week to switch off the electric light supply to the vacant flat! Now she would have to explore the place in the dark.

She felt her way along the wall to the first of the four doors that she knew opened onto this landing. It opened easily; and Margaret again silently cursed the owners. If only they'd take the trouble to fix locks on their own property she would have been spared all this—the top flat would have been properly locked up the moment the Davidsons left, and then there would have been no possibility of anyone lurking there. Her annoyance strengthened her, and she flung the door wide open.

Empty, of course. Accustomed as her eyes were to the complete blackness of the landing, the room seemed to her quite brightly lit by the dim square of the window, and she could see at a glance into every empty corner.

The next room was empty too, and the next, except for the twisted, shadowy bulk of the antique gas cooker which Mrs. Davidson so often declared had "gone funny on her," and might she boil up a kettle on the slightly newer cooker in Margaret's flat?

But the fourth door *was* locked. Nothing surprising in that, Margaret told herself, turning the shaky china knob this way and that without success. Not surprising at all. All the rooms ought to have been locked like this—probably this was the only one which *would* lock, and the owners had lazily hoped for the best about the others. A perfectly natural explanation: no need to turn the handle so stealthily . . .

To prove the point, Margaret gave the knob a brisk rattle, and it came off in her hand. Just like this house! she was thinking, and heard the corresponding knob on the other side of the door fall to the floor with a report like a pistol in the silence of the night.

But what was *that?* It might have been the echo of the bang, of course,

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in the empty room. Or—yes, of course, that must be it! Margaret let her breath go in a sigh of relief. That scraping, tapping noise—that was exactly the noise a china knob would make, rolling lopsidedly across the bare boards. Wasn't it?

Yes, of course it was. Margaret was surprised to find how quickly she had got back to her own flat—to her lighted sitting-room—to her own fireside, her heart beating annoyingly, and the dirty china knob still in her hand.

Leonora hesitated, wondering which way she should turn.

Margaret pushed the book away with a gesture of irritation. She had thought that by facing her fear —by going up to the empty flat, looking in all the rooms and shutting the doors firmly so that they couldn't bang, she would have regained her peace of mind. Yet here she was, sitting just as before, her heart thumping, her ears straining for she did not know what.

What *is* it all about? she asked herself. Has anything happened today to make me feel nervous? Have I subconsciously noticed anyone suspicious lurking about outside? God knows it's a queer enough neighborhood! And leaning her chin on her hands, her thick black curls falling forward onto her damp forehead, she thought over the day.

Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary. Henry had gone to work as usual. The boys had been got off to school with the usual amount of clatter and argument—Peter unable to find his wellingtons, and Robin announcing, at the very last moment, just as they were starting down the steps, that his teacher had said they were all to bring a cardboard box four inches wide and a long thin piece of string.

Then had followed the morning battle for cleanliness against the obstinate old house. The paintwork that collapsed into dry rot if you wiped it too thoroughly. The cobwebs that brought bits of plaster down with them when you got at them with a broom. . . .

They weren't going to be here much longer, that was one thing, reflected Margaret. They would be moving to the country soon after Christmas, and it hadn't seemed worthwhile to look for anywhere else to live for such a short time. Besides, if they *had* to live in a flat with two lively small boys, this ramshackle old place offered some advantages. Among all this decay no one was going to notice sticky fingermarks and more chipped paint; no one was going to complain about what games the children played in the neglected garden, overgrown with brambles and willow herb. No one minded their boots, and the boots of their numerous small friends, clattering up and down the stairs.

Margaret smiled as she thought of the odd assortment of friends her sons had managed to collect during

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their six months here. Such a queer mixture of children in a neighborhood like this, ranging from real little street toughs to the bespectacled son of a divorced but celebrated professor. Always in and out of the house—Margaret couldn't put a name to half of them. That crowd this afternoon, for instance—who *were* they all?

Margaret wrinkled her brows, trying to remember. Alan, of course, the freckle-faced mischief from the paper shop at the corner. And Raymond—the fair, sly boy that Henry said she shouldn't let the children play with—but what could you do? And William—stodgy, mouse-colored William—who simply came to eat her cakes, it seemed to Margaret, for he never played at anything in particular with the others.

Oh, and there had been another one today—a new one, for whom Margaret had felt an immediate revulsion. About eight or nine he must have been, very small for his age and yet strangely mature, with a sharp, shrewd light in his pale, red-rimmed eyes. He had a coarse mop of ill-cut ginger hair and the palest of pale eyebrows and eyelashes, almost invisible in his pale, pinched face. And he was painfully thin.

In spite of her dislike, Margaret had been touched by the thinness—and puzzled, too—real undernourishment is so rare in children nowadays. She had pressed on him cakes and bread and jam, but he had not eaten anything—indeed, he seemed scarcely aware that anything was being offered him—and in the end Margaret had given up and let the others demolish the provisions with their usual speed.

Margaret shivered, suddenly cold, and leaned forward to put more coal on the fire. The memory of this queer, ginger-haired child had somehow made her feel uneasy all over again. She wished she'd made more effort to find out who he was and where he came from, but the boys were always so vague about that sort of thing.

"What, Mummy?" Peter had said when she had asked him about the child that evening; "Mummy, you said *I* could have the next corn-flake packet, and now Robin."

"Yes, yes, darling, but listen. Who was that little ginger-haired boy you brought home from school today?"

"Who did?" interrupted Robin helpfully.

"Well—Peter, I suppose. Or do *you* know him, Robin? Perhaps he's *your* friend?"

"Who is?"

Margaret had sighed. "The little ginger-haired boy. The one who hardly ate anything at tea."

"*I* didn't hardly eat anything, either," remarked Robin smugly.

"Ooo—you story!" broke in Peter indignantly. "I saw you myself, you had three cakes, and . . ."

Margaret had given it up, and determined to ask the child himself if he ever turned up again.

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And, strangely enough, as she had gone across their own landing to put on the boys' bath, she thought she caught a glimpse of the little creature in the hall below, darting past the foot of the stairs. But she couldn't be sure; dusk always fell early in that dim, derelict hall, and the whole thing might have been a trick of the light. Anyway, when she had gone to the back door and called into the damp autumn twilight, there had been no answer, and nothing stirred among the rank, overgrown shrubs and weeds.

Margaret picked up her book again, slightly reassured. All this could quite reasonably explain her nervousness tonight. She was feeling guilty, that's what it must be. There was something peculiar about the child, and she should have made more effort to find out about him. Perhaps he needed help—after all, there *were* cases of child cruelty and neglect even nowadays. Tomorrow she would really go into the matter, and then there would be nothing more to worry about.

Leonora hesitated, wondering which way she should turn.

Sometimes, on waking from a deep sleep, one knows with absolute certainty that something has wakened one, but without knowing what. Margaret knew, with just this certainty, that something had made her raise her eyes from the book. She listened—listened as she had listened before that night—to the deep pulsing in her ears, to the tiny flickering murmur of the coals. Nothing more.

But wasn't there? What was that, then, that faint, faint shuffle on the landing outside? Shuffle, shuffle, soft as an autumn leaf drifting—shuffle shuffle—pad pad . . . silently the door swung open and there stood Robin, blinking, half asleep.

Margaret let out her breath in a gasp of relief.

"Robin! Whatever's the matter? Why aren't you asleep?"

Robin blinked at her owlishly, his eyes large and round as they always were when just wakened from sleep.

"I don't like that little boy in my bed," he observed.

"What little boy? Whatever are you talking about, Robin?"

"That little boy. He's horrid. He pinches me. And he's muddling the blankets. On purpose."

"Darling, you're dreaming! Come along and let's see!"

Taking the child's hand, Margaret led him back into his own room and switched on the light.

There was Peter, rosily asleep with his mouth open as usual; and there was Robin's little bed, empty, and with the clothes tumbled this way and that as if he had tossed about a lot in his sleep.

This confirmed Margaret's opinion that he had had a nightmare. After all, what was more likely after her cross-questioning about the mysterious little visitor that eve-

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ning? In spite of his apparent inattention, Robin had no doubt sensed something of the anxiety and distaste behind her questions, and it was the most likely thing in the world that he would dream about it when he went to bed.

However, to reassure the child, Margaret embarked on a thorough search of the little room. Under both the beds they looked, into the clothes closet, behind the curtains—even, at Robin's insistence, into the impossibly narrow space behind the chest of drawers.

"He was such a *thin* little boy, you see, Mummy," Robin explained, and the phrase gave Margaret a nasty little pang of uneasiness. The hungry, too-old little face seemed to hover before her for a moment, its eyes full of ancient, malicious knowledge. She blinked it away, shut the lid of the brick box (what an absurd place to look!), and bundled Robin firmly back to bed.

"And do you promise I won't dream it again?" asked Robin anxiously, and Margaret promised. This was the standard formula after Robin's nightmares. It had always worked before.

Nearly twelve o'clock. There was nothing whatever to stay up for, but somehow Margaret couldn't bring herself to go to bed. She reached out toward her library book, but felt that she could not face Leonora's indecision again, and instead picked up yesterday's evening paper. She would look for something cheerful to read before she went to bed. The autumn fashions, perhaps—or would it be the spring ones they'd be writing about in October? It was all very confusing nowadays.

But it wasn't the autumn fashions she found herself reading—or the spring ones. It was the blurred photograph of the wanted man that caught her eye—a man in his fifties perhaps—from such a bad picture it was difficult to tell. A picture of the murdered woman, too—a Mrs. Harriet somebody—and a description of her . . .

Margaret's attention suddenly became riveted and she read the report from beginning to end, hardly daring to breathe. This man, at large somewhere in London tonight, had escaped from a mental institution where he had been sent some years ago for strangling another woman in somewhat similar circumstances to this Mrs. Harriet . . .

Margaret felt her limbs grow rigid. Both women had been the mothers of small boys . . . both had lived in tall derelict houses converted into flats . . . both had had black hair done in tight curls . . . Margaret fingered her hairstyle with damp, trembling fingers, and tried not to read any more, but her eyes seemed glued to the page. Why had the man not been hanged that first time?

There followed the story of his childhood—a story of real Dickensian horror. Brought up in a tall ruined old house by a stepmother

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who had starved him, thrashed him, shut him in dark rooms where she told him clawed fiends were waiting . . . her black, shining curls had quivered over his childhood like the insignia of torture and death. The prison doctors had learned all this from him after the first murder—and had learned, too, how the sight of a black-haired woman going up the steps of just such a derelict house as he remembered had brought back his terror and misery with such vividness that "I didn't just *feel* like a little boy again—I *was* a little boy . . . that was my house . . . that was *her*"——that was the only way he could describe it. And he had crept into the house, locked himself in one of the empty rooms until the dead silence of the night, and then crept out, with a child's enormity of terror and hatred in his heart, and with a man's strength in his fingers . . .

Margaret closed her eyes for a second, and then opened them again to read the description of the murderer: "About fifty years of age, medium height, ginger hair growing gray, eyebrows and eyelashes almost invisible . . ." With every word the face leaped before her more vividly—not the face of the aging, unknown man, but the little malevolent face she had seen that afternoon—the ill-cut ginger hair, the little red-rimmed eyes filled with the twisted malice of an old and bitter man . . .

"I didn't just *feel* like a little boy again, I *was* a little boy . . ." The words beat through Margaret's brain, over and over again.

She thrust the paper away from her. Don't be so fanciful and absurd, she told herself. After all, if I *really* think anything's wrong all I've got to do is call the police. There's the telephone just there in the hall.

She walked slowly to the door and out onto the landing, and stood there in her little island of light with darkness above and below. She tried to go on telling herself what nonsense it all was, how ridiculous she was being. But now she dared not let any more words come into her mind, not any words at all. For she was listening—listening as civilized human beings rarely have need to listen——listening as an animal listens in the murderous blackness of the forest. Not just with the ears—rather with the whole body. Every organ, every nerve is alert, pricked up, so that, in the end, it is impossible to say through which sense the message comes, and comes with absolute certainty: Danger is near. Danger is on the move.

For there was no sound. Margaret was certain of that. No sound to tell her that something was stirring in the locked room upstairs—that dark, empty room so like the locked room where once a little boy had gone half mad with terror at the thought of the clawed fiends. The clawed fiends who had lost

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their terrors through the years and become his friends and allies, for now at last he was a clawed fiend himself.

Still Margaret heard no sound. No sound to tell that the door of the empty room was being unlocked, silently, and with consummate skill, from the inside. No shuffle of footsteps across the dusty upstairs landing. No creak from the ancient, rickety steps of that top flight of stairs.

And in the end it was not Margaret's straining ears at all which caught the first hint of the oncoming creature—it was her eyes. They seemed to have been riveted on that shadowy bend in the bannisters for so long that when she saw the hand at last, long and tapering, like five snakes coiled round the rail, she could have imagined it had been there all the time, flickering in and out and dancing before her eyes.

But not the face. No, that couldn't have been there before. Not anywhere, in all the world, could there have been a face like that—a face so distorted, so alight with hate that it seemed almost luminous as it leered out of the blackness, as it seemed to glide down toward her a foot or two above the bannister . . .

There was a sound now——a quick pattering of feet, horribly light and soft, like a child's, as they bore the heavy adult shape down the stairs, the white, curled fingers reaching out toward her . . .

A little frightened cry at Margaret's elbow freed her from her paralysis. A little white face, a tangle of ginger hair . . . and an instinct stronger than that of self-preservation gripped her. In a second she was on her knees, her arms round the small trembling body; she felt the little creature's shaking terror subsiding into a great peace as she held him against her breast.

That dropping on her knees was her salvation. In that very second her assailant lunged, tripped over her suddenly lowered body, and pitched headlong down the stairs behind her. Crash upon crash as he fell from step to step, and then silence. Absolute silence.

Then a new clamor arose.

"Mummy! Mummy! Who . . . ? What . . . ?"—a tangle of small legs and arms, and in a moment her arms seemed to be full of little boys. She collected her wits and looked down at them. Only two of them, of course, her own two, their familiar dark heads pressed against her, their frightened questions clamoring in her ears . . .

And when the police came, and Henry came, and the dead man was taken away, there was so much to tell, so much to explain. It could all be explained quite easily, of course (as Henry pointed out), with only a little stretching of coincidence.

The little ginger-headed boy must come from somewhere in the neighborhood—no doubt he could be traced, and if necessary helped in some way. Margaret's obsession

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about him would explain Robin's dream; it would also explain why, in that moment of terror, she imagined the strange child had rushed into her arms. Really, of course, it must have been one of her own boys.

And yet, Margaret could never forget the smile on the face of the dead man as he lay crumpled at the foot of the stairs. They say that the faces of the dead can set in all sorts of incongruous expressions, but it seemed to Margaret that the smile had not been the smile of a grown man at all; it had been the smile of a little boy who has felt the comfort of a mother's arms at last.

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FROM THE FEAR OF OUR ENEMIES

by CHARLENE M. WEIR

THE LATENESS OF THE HOUR FORCED Martin's thoughts from the death of Mary Lester and directed them toward the evening service. It was already 6:30 and the vesper service was scheduled to begin in an hour.

Martin Kellman swallowed the last of his coffee. "I must be going, my dear," he said to his wife.

Cora Kellman nodded and began to clear the table. Forty-five years of marriage made it possible for her to sense his thoughts, and her usually cheerful face was drawn in sympathy. She placed a reassuring hand on his arm. "There's nothing more you can do," she said. "The police will find out who did it."

"Yes. I'll say a special prayer tonight for Mary's husband and the little girl." He patted her arm vague-

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ly and mumbled to himself as he left the parsonage, "I just pray that it's not too late for the little girl."

Usually Martin felt almost as young as when he took over his first parish so many years ago. Granted, his knees were a little stiff and his hair was completely white. But his voice was still firm, and his hands steady. Tonight he felt the 70 years of his age. Most of the afternoon had been spent giving whatever comfort he could to George Lester. George and his wife owned a grocery store on the edge of town. Sometime during the afternoon while George was gone, the store had been robbed, George's wife killed, and his five-year-old daughter kidnaped.

Martin sighed at the vast amount of evil that Satan could wreak, and entered the squat brick building with its stained-glass windows. He hesitated a moment, listening, before attributing the thumps he heard to the vagaries of the aged building; then he walked slowly into the vestry.

Sitting down on the only chair in the small room, he folded his hands in his lap for a few moments of quiet meditation. Again he heard a thud, and this time he realized it came from the closet. He reached the closet in a few steps and threw open the door. His mild, blue eyes darkened in anger when he saw them.

The little girl, her eyes wide with fear, her face smudged with dirt and tears, ceased her futile struggling. The man had one hand clamped cruelly over her mouth, and his other hand held a gun.

"Well, Reverend," he said, "since you had the bad luck of finding us I guess we can come out."

"Let that child go," Martin ordered.

The man gave the little girl a shove and she threw herself at the pastor, tears rearranging the streaks on her face. Martin put his arm around her and clasped the small quivering body. "It'll be all right, Debbie," he murmured as he stroked her matted hair.

The man, tall and thin, had a narrow face with thin lips and he wore a dark suit. He leaned one hip on the corner of the desk. Crossing his arms at the wrist, he lightly held the gun pointed toward Martin.

Anger caused Martin's voice to shake. "Who are you?"

"Name's Ed. What are you doing here?"

"This is my church."

"Yeah, I figured that. But it's not Sunday."

"There's a service this evening."

"Tonight? When?" The man's fingers tightened on the gun as he frowned.

Martin kept his arm protectively around Debbie and glanced at his watch. "In fifteen minutes. I expect the organist to be here any minute and the ushers will arrive shortly after him."

Ed straightened and paced back

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and forth in the small room. "That's bad. The one night when I need this place and you have to have a service. Now what am I going to do?" He squeezed the words out through tight lips and pivoting on one foot he raised the gun.

Debbie cowered against Martin.

"It wouldn't be a wise thing to do." Martin kept his voice low and steady. "If I'm not there to conduct the service someone will come back here to see why not and then the police would be after you in a very short time."

"I only need to stay here till ten o'clock and then somebody's coming to pick me up. The police will never think of looking here. They'll figure I left town hours ago. This was a perfect hideaway until you showed up." He resumed his pacing. "Call it off."

"I couldn't possibly. Some of the members are already on their way. Why don't you give me the gun, young man? If you repent of your sins, God in all His mercy will forgive you."

"Shut up. I need to think."

"The authorities may take into consideration the fact that you didn't harm the child."

Ed snorted. "Ha. Not a chance. That stupid woman. She wouldn't give me the money. I had to kill her."

"Why did you kidnap a five-year-old little girl?"

"I thought she might come in handy in case I got in a tight spot."

"My son—"

"Shut up, Reverend. It'll still be all right. You go ahead with the program."

"It's not a program. It's a service."

"All right. Service. Same thing."

"Not at all, a program is—"

"All right, all right! It doesn't matter. You do the service just like you always do. And afterwards you and me and the kid will wait here for my friend. Understand?"

Martin nodded and glanced from Ed to Debbie. She had stopped crying, but her eyes were still big with fear. She absently fingered a rip in one knee of her blue jeans while watching Ed.

"And remember," Ed was saying, "that the kid stays with me. If you don't try anything stupid, nobody will get hurt. When my friend gets here, I'll take off. We'll have to tie you up first, so we can get away before you call the cops, but somebody will find you sooner or later."

Martin felt a sense of relief. At least Ed didn't plan to harm Debbie. Perhaps it was best to do as he asked. Then even if he did elude the police, Debbie would be safe.

Footsteps could be heard coming toward the vestry. Ed jerked Debbie into the closet. "Get rid of whoever that is. I'll be listening, so don't try anything. Just remember I've already killed once."

There was a tap, tap and as Martin went to the door a chill shivered down his back. Nobody knew who had killed Mary Lester. Ed

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was not going to simply tie them up and leave them to tell the police. Ed had no intention of letting him and Debbie go. It had only been talk to get him to cooperate. When there was no further need of them, he and Debbie would be killed.

Martin opened the door and a young man, Frank Gibbs, stood in the doorway. "Sorry to bother you, Pastor, but the other usher isn't here yet and people will be coming pretty soon."

Martin drew in a quick breath, his thoughts darting to and fro in his mind seeking a way to tell Frank about Ed without getting them all shot. "Yes. Well, get in touch with Sam Bauer right away."

"Sam won't be here tonight. Don't you remember, he's on duty tonight at the police station."

Martin frowned. "Yes. Well, you manage as best you can and if the other usher doesn't come within the next few minutes, get one of the other members to help you."

"Right. Well, don't worry. I'll find somebody to help me."

Frank left and Martin slowly closed the door. His knees suddenly felt weak as Ed emerged from the closet, his face tight with anger. Frank hadn't realized what Martin was trying to say, but Ed certainly had.

"Not too smart, Reverend. Keep it up and we'll have a problem. What's the matter, don't you believe I'll use this gun? I don't have much to lose at this point. Just remember, I still have the kid."

Martin winced when he heard the wheezy chords from the organ. He had never been able to convince his parishioners of the need for a new one. This one was so bad it grated on his ears as much as squeaky chalk. But it did give him an idea. Under the pretense of discussing the service he could go out and talk to the organist. It was far enough away so Ed couldn't hear. Martin moved toward the door.

"I must inform the organist of a change in the service."

"Just a minute." Ed motioned toward the chair with the gun and Martin reluctantly returned. "You know I'm not going to let you talk to anybody."

"If I don't talk to him there will be a muddle at the end of the service and the members will wonder why. Somebody may come back here after the service to find out about it."

Ed frowned. "If you're trying to con me—"

"I thought it would be better if things went smoothly. For everybody's sake. The fewer people who come back here, the less chance for discovery."

Ed rummaged through the clutter on the desk and came up with a pad which he tossed to Martin. "Write him a note."

Martin's fingers trembled slightly as he took a pen from his pocket. He hesitated an instant, then scribbled quickly on the page, tore it off, and folded it once. Ed held out his hand

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and Martin, after a momentary qualm, handed him the slip of paper. Ed unfolded the note.

Scrawled in almost undecipherable script were the words: "Play all verses of last hymn." He gave it back to Martin. "Okay. I thought you might be trying something else. Go ahead and give it to him." His voice hardened. "But I'm going to be watching from the door and if you say even one word, you'll be very sorry. And so will the kid."

Martin took a deep breath and left the room. He gave the note to the organist, who glanced at it and nodded; then Martin returned to the vestry. There seemed to be only one other possibility to try.

He knelt in front of the little girl and put his hands on her arms. "Debbie, I want you to listen carefully and do just what I ask. The service is going to start now and I have to go out there. You stay here with Ed and be very quiet, just like you would if you were sitting in the congregation. He won't hurt you as long as you don't make any noise. Will you do that?"

Debbie nodded and Martin's heart gave a lurch as he saw the trust in her small upturned face. He hoped he was doing the right thing. Martin stood up and patted her head. "You're a good girl. I'll be back as soon as the service is over."

He took a heavy black robe from the closet and put it on. "She'll be all right as long as you don't scare her."

"I won't bother her, unless I hear you say something out there that makes me suspicious."

A stab of fear hit Martin as he put the white surplice over the black robe. "Did you ever go to church?"

"Yeah. I used to go here when I was a kid."

"You haven't been since then?" Martin asked as he adjusted the heavy gold cross around his neck.

"No. But don't let it worry you. I'll take care of my own soul."

Martin didn't have time to discuss this point. He merely said a silent prayer as he left the vestry. The members of the congregation sang the amen of the first hymn and rose to their feet. Martin chanted the first versicle in the liturgy of the vesper service. He proceeded automatically, his mind busy with a plan to notify the police. It all depended on Cora and even though he knew his wife would be there, he was relieved when he saw her in a pew a few rows from the front. She seemed to sense that something was not quite right and nervously tucked bits of gray hair under her hat.

Martin continued normally with the service. He even noted, as was his habit, the members in attendance and resolved to pay a call on those who hadn't come. He cut short his sermon by five minutes, partly because he was worried about Debbie, and partly because he wanted to reach that section of the service that was all-important this evening. He chanted the Lord's

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Prayer with the congregation and then instead of facing the altar as customary, he turned and faced the congregation. He hoped that no one except Cora would notice this small change in the order of the service.

He stared at his wife intently. "Listen," he beseeched her in his mind, "please listen carefully"—as though by force of will he could transmit his thoughts to her mind.

He caught Cora's glance and held it with his own. She frowned, straining to understand, and shifted her short figure uneasily on the pew.

Martin began to chant the Collect for Peace, "O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed, go unto thy servants of peace which the world cannot give, that our hearts may be set to obey Thy commandments, and also that by Thee, we, being defended from the fear of our enemies, may pass our time in rest and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ, our Savior, who liveth and reigneth with Thee and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end."

Martin felt weak with relief when Cora rose, slipped out of the pew, and quietly walked to the front door. When the organist began the last hymn Martin returned to the vestry. His heart skipped a beat when he saw the room empty. Then Martin pulled open the closet door.

Ed whispered harshly, "Shut the door and sit down until everybody's gone."

Martin gave Debbie a reassuring smile and closed the door. The organist played verse after verse of the last hymn until finally the strains of the amen drifted back. Martin listened as his parishioners filed out of the church. Usually after the service he stood at the front door and greeted all the members as they came out. He desperately hoped that no one would come back to find out why he wasn't in his accustomed place.

After fifteen minutes the last car drove away and the building was quiet. Ed pushed open the closet door and stepped out. "Well, Reverend, I'm proud of you. That was smart. Now, we'll just all sit here calmly and wait for my friend."

Debbie sidled over to Martin, peering nervously at Ed. Martin meshed his hands to keep them from trembling. He smiled at Debbie. "You were a good girl. You did just what I asked."

Debbie gave him a timid smile exposing the gap caused by one missing front tooth. He pulled her toward him and flinched involuntarily when he heard a whisper of movement from the church. He looked sharply at Ed to see if he had heard and began speaking to help cover any other noises. "What are you going to do now?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll be out of here in an hour and you'll never see me again."

"The eyes of the Lord will see—"

"Yeah, well, it's not those eyes I'm worried about."

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"Do you really expect to get away?"

"Sure, why not? Nobody even knows what I look like."

Martin shivered inwardly, being fully aware that he and Debbie knew. "Even if you manage to go free now, you cannot escape in the end. You have committed a grievous sin. You should repent and make restitution before it is too late."

A soft creak caused Ed's fingers to tighten on the gun. "What was that?"

Martin's heart set up a frantic beating under his ribs, but he managed to answer calmly. "This building is old. When it's empty it permits itself the luxury of a tired groan now and then."

Ed stood rigid, glaring at Martin. "That better be all it is." He whirled and took a step toward the door.

"Hold it!" A voice commanded from the body of the church. Rage twisted the features of Ed's face as he spun around to face Martin and raised the gun.

"Why you—"

A shot thundered out, a deafening sound in the small room. Debbie screamed and Martin enfolded her in his arms. Ed crumpled to the floor clutching his shoulder and a stream of curses dribbled from his thin lips.

The room filled with uniformed policemen. One of them seized Ed's gun and handed it to a middle-aged man in a conservative gray suit. Cora rushed in to take charge of Debbie with motherly croons. She held the little girl tight to her chest and peered over the tousled head at Martin. Her face registered thanks that he was all right, and she guided Debbie toward the door.

Lieutenant Decker gave Ed a contemptuous glance, then looked at Martin. "You all right?"

Martin nodded. "Yes, I believe so."

The lieutenant instructed one of the officers to call for an ambulance. "Now," he said, "what's the story here?"

Martin explained what had happened. "So I sent Cora to notify you," he finished.

Lieutenant Decker nodded. "Your wife insisted that we sneak up on you. She didn't know why, but she was sure you were in some kind of trouble. I guess we'll wait around until this friend shows up."

Ed muttered, "I still don't understand how you did it. I was listening to every word."

"Young man, no service normally includes instructions to 'go unto thy servants of peace.' The usual words are 'give unto Thy servants that peace which the world cannot give.' If you had attended church regularly you wouldn't be in this sad situation."

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a NERO WOLFE complete SHORT NOVEL by REX STOUT

We can't recall a single Nero Wolfe murder case in which there wasn't at least one very pretty girl or one beautiful woman in the cast of characters; if there hadn't been at least one, Archie Goodwin wouldn't have bothered to tell the story and we'd therefore never have known about it. But imagine a Nero Wolfe murder case in which there are twelve (to quote Archie himself) "absolutely irresistibly beautiful and fascinating" young women, their individual and combined beauty "far beyond the wildest dreams of any poet."

It was that kind of case—an epicurean delight, or, to quote Archie again, "one of the most elaborate charades Nero Wolfe had ever staged" . . .

POISON À LA CARTE

by REX STOUT

I SLANTED MY EYES DOWN TO MEET her big brown ones, which were slanted up. "No," I said, "I'm neither a producer nor an agent. My name's Archie Goodwin, and I'm here because I'm a friend of the cook. My reason for wanting it is purely personal."

"I know," she said, "it's my dimples. Men often swoon."

I shook my head. "It's your earrings. They remind me of a girl I once loved in vain. Perhaps if I get to know you well enough—who can tell?"

"Not me," she declared. "Let me alone. I'm nervous, and I don't want to spill the soup. The name is Nora Jaret, without an H, and the number is Stanhope five, six-six-two-one. The earrings were a present from Sir Laurence Olivier. I was sitting on his knee."

I wrote the number down in my notebook, thanked her, and looked around. Most of the collection of attractive young females were gathered in an alcove between two cupboards, but one was over by a table watching Felix stir something in a bowl. Her profile was fine and her hair was the color of corn silk just before it starts to turn. I crossed to her, and when she turned her head I spoke. "Good evening, Miss—Miss?"

"Annis," she said. "Carol Annis."

I wrote it down, and told her my

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name. "I am not blunt by nature," I said, "but you're busy, or soon will be, and there isn't time to talk up to it. I was standing watching you and all of a sudden I had an impulse to ask you for your phone number, and I'm no good at fighting impulses. Now that you're close up it's even stronger, and I guess we'll have to humor it."

But I may be giving a wrong impression. Actually I had no special hankering that Tuesday evening for new telephone numbers; I was doing it for Fritz. But that could give a wrong impression too, so I'll have to explain.

One day in February, Lewis Hewitt, the millionaire orchid fancier for whom Nero Wolfe had once handled a tough problem, had told Wolfe that the Ten for Aristology wanted Fritz Brenner to cook their annual dinner, to be given as usual on April first, Brillat-Savarin's birthday. When Wolfe said he had never heard of the Ten for Aristology, Hewitt explained that it was a group of ten men pursuing the ideal of perfection in food and drink, and he was one of them. Wolfe had swiveled to the dictionary on its stand at a corner of his desk, and after consulting it had declared that "aristology" meant the science of dining, and therefore the Ten were witlings, since dining was not a science but an art. After a long argument Hewitt had admitted he was licked and had agreed that the name should be changed, and Wolfe had given him permission to ask Fritz to cook the dinner.

In fact, Wolfe was pleased, though of course he wouldn't say so. It took a big slice of his income as a private detective to pay Fritz Brenner, chef and housekeeper in the old brownstone on West 35th Street—about the same as the slice that came to me as his assistant detective and man Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday—not to mention what it took to supply the kitchen with the raw materials of Fritz's productions. Since I am also the bookkeeper, I can certify that for the year 1957 the kitchen and Fritz cost only slightly less than the plant rooms on the roof bulging with orchids.

So when Hewitt made it clear that the Ten, though they might be dubs at picking names, were true and trustworthy gourmets, that the dinner would be at the home of Benjamin Schriver, the shipping magnate, who wrote a letter to *The Times* every year on September first denouncing the use of horseradish on oysters, and that the cook would have a free hand on the menu and the Ten would furnish whatever he desired, Wolfe pushed a button to summon Fritz. There was a little hitch when Fritz refused to commit himelf until he had seen the Schriver kitchen, but Hewitt settled that by escorting him out front to his Heron town car and driving him down to Eleventh Street to inspect the kitchen.

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That's where I was that Tuesday evening, April first, collecting phone numbers—in the kitchen of the four-story Schriver house on Eleventh Street west of Fifth Avenue. Wolfe and I had been invited by Schriver, and though Wolfe dislikes eating with strangers and thinks that more than six at table spoils a meal, he knew Fritz's feelings would be hurt if he didn't go; and besides, if he stayed home who would cook his dinner? Even so, he would probably have balked if he had learned of one detail which Fritz and I knew about but had carefully kept from him: that the table was to be served by twelve young women, one for each guest.

When Hewitt had told me that, I had protested that I wouldn't be responsible for Wolfe's conduct when the orgy got under way, that he would certainly stamp out of the house when the girls started to squeal. Good lord, Hewitt said, nothing like that; that wasn't the idea at all. It was merely that the Ten had gone to ancient Greece not only for their name but also for other precedents. Hebe, the goddess of youth, had been cupbearer to the gods, so it was the custom of the Ten for Aristology to be waited on by maidens in appropriate dress. When I asked where they got the maidens he said through a theatrical agency, and added that at that time of year there were always hundreds of young actresses out of a job glad to grab at a chance to make fifty bucks, with a good meal thrown in, by spending an evening carrying food, one plate at a time. Originally they had hired experienced waitresses from an agency, but they had tripped on their stolas.

Wolfe and I had arrived at seven on the dot, and after we had met our host and the rest of the Ten, and had sampled oysters and our choice of five white wines, I had made my way to the kitchen to see how Fritz was making out. He was tasting from a pot on the range, with no more sign of fluster than if he had been at home getting dinner for Wolfe and me. Felix and Zoltan, from Rusterman's, were there to help, so I didn't ask if I was needed.

And there were the Hebes, cupbearers to the gods, twelve of them, in their stolas, deep rich purple, flowing garments to their ankles. Very nice. It gave me an idea. Fritz likes to pretend that he has reason to believe that no damsel is safe within a mile of me, which doesn't make sense since you can't tell much about them a mile off, and I thought it would do him good to see me operate at close quarters. Also, it was a challenge and an interesting sociological experiment. The first two had been a cinch: one named Fern Faber, so she said, a tall blonde with a wide lazy mouth, and Nora Jaret with the big brown eyes and dimples. Now I was after this Carol Annis with hair like corn silk.

"I have no sense of humor," she said and turned back to watch Felix.

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I stuck. "That's a different kind of humor and an impulse like mine isn't funny. It hurts. Maybe I can guess it. Is it Hebe one, oh-oh-oh-oh?"

No reply.

"Apparently not. Plato two, three-four-five-six?"

She said, without turning her head, "It's listed. Gorham eight, three-two-one-seven." Her head jerked to me. "Please?" It jerked back again.

It rather sounded as if she meant please go away, not please ring her as soon as possible, but I wrote it down anyway, for the record, and moved off. The rest of them were still grouped in the alcove, and I crossed over. The deep purple of the stolas was a good contrast for their pretty young faces topped by nine different colors and styles of hair-dos. As I came up the chatter stopped and the faces turned to me.

"At ease," I told them. "I have no official standing. I am merely one of the guests, invited because I'm a friend of the cook, and I have a personal problem. I would prefer to discuss it with each of you separately and privately, but since there isn't time for that—"

"I know who you are," one declared. "You're a detective and you work for Nero Wolfe. You're Archie Goodwin."

She was a redhead with milky skin. "I don't deny it," I told her, "but I'm not here professionally. I don't ask if I've met you because if I had I wouldn't have forgot—"

"You haven't met me. I've seen you and I've seen your picture. You like yourself. Don't you?"

"Certainly. I string along with the majority. We'll take a vote. How many of you like yourselves? Raise your hands."

A hand went up with a bare arm shooting out of the purple folds, then two more, then the rest of them, including the redhead.

"Okay," I said, "that's settled. Unanimous. My problem is that I decided to look you over and ask the most absolutely irresistibly beautiful and fascinating one of the bunch for her phone number, and I'm stalled. You are all it. In beauty and fascination you are all far beyond the wildest dreams of any poet, and I'm not a poet. So obviously I'm in a fix. How can I possibly pick on one of you, any one, when—"

"Nuts." It was the redhead. "Me, of course. Peggy Choate. Argyle two, three-three-four-eight. Don't call before noon."

"That's not fair," a throaty voice objected. It came from one who looked a little too old for Hebe, and just a shade too plump. It went on, "Do I call you Archie?"

"Sure, that's my name."

"All right, Archie, have your eyes examined." She lifted an arm, baring it, to touch the shoulder of one beside her. "We admit we're all beautiful, but we're not in the same class as Helen Iacono. Look at her!"

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I was doing so, and I must say that the throaty voice had a point. Helen Iacono, with deep dark eyes, dark velvet skin, and wavy silky hair darker than either skin or eyes, was unquestionably rare and special. Her lips were parted enough to show the gleam of white teeth, but she wasn't laughing. She wasn't reacting at all, which was remarkable for an actress.

"It may be," I conceded, "that I am so dazzled by the collective radiance that I am blind to the glory of any single star. Perhaps I'm a poet after all, I sound like one. My feeling that I must have the phone numbers of *all* of you is certainly no reflection on Helen Iacono. I admit that that will not completely solve the problem, for tomorrow I must face the question which one to call first. If I feel as I do right now I would have to dial all the numbers simultaneously, and that's impossible. I hope to heaven it doesn't end in a stalemate. What if I can never decide which one to call first? What if it drives me mad? Or what if I gradually sink—"

I turned to see who was tugging at my sleeve. It was Benjamin Schriver, the host, with a grin on his ruddy round face. He said, "I hate to interrupt your speech, but perhaps you can finish it later. We're ready to sit. Will you join us?"

The dining room, on the same floor as the kitchen, three feet or so below street level, would have been too gloomy for my taste if most of the dark wood paneling hadn't been covered with pictures of geese, pheasants, fish, fruit, vegetables, and other assorted edible objects; and also it helped that the tablecloth was white as snow, the wineglasses, seven of them at each place, glistened in the soft light from above, and the polished silver shone. In the center was a low gilt bowl, or maybe gold, two feet long, filled with clusters of Phalaenopsis Aphrodite, donated by Wolfe, cut by him that afternoon from some of his most treasured plants.

As he sat he was scowling at them, but the scowl was not for the orchids; it was for the chair, which, though a little fancy, was perfectly okay for you or me but not for his seventh of a ton. His fundament lapped over at both sides. He erased the scowl when Schriver, at the end of the table, complimented him on the flowers, and Hewitt, across from him, said he had never seen Phalaenopsis better grown, and the others joined in the chorus, all but the aristologist who sat between Wolfe and me. He was a Wall Street character and a well-known theatrical angel named Vincent Pyle, and was living up to his reputation as an original by wearing a dinner jacket, with tie to match, which looked black until you had the light at a certain slant and then you saw that it was green. He eyed the orchids with his head cocked and his mouth puckered, and said, "I don't care for flowers

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with spots and streaks. They're messy."

I thought, but didn't say, Okay, drop dead. If I had known that that was what he was going to do in about three hours I might not even have thought it. He got a rise, not from Wolfe or me, or Schriver or Hewitt, but from three others who thought flowers with spots and streaks were wonderful: Adrian Dart, the actor who had turned down an offer of a million a week, more or less, from Hollywood; Emil Kreis, Chairman of the Board of Codex Press, book publishers; and Harvey M. Leacraft, corporation lawyer.

Actually, cupbearers was what the Hebes were not. The wines, beginning with the Montrachet with the first course, were poured by Felix; but the girls delivered the food, with different routines for different items. The first course, put on individual plates in the kitchen, with each girl bringing in a plate for her aristologist, was small blinis sprinkled with chopped chives, piled with caviar, and topped with sour cream—the point, as far as Fritz was concerned, being that he had made the blinis, starting on them at eleven that morning, and also the sour cream, starting on that Sunday evening. Fritz's sour cream is very special, but Vincent Pyle had to get in a crack. After he had downed all his blinis he remarked, loud enough to carry around the table, "A new idea, putting sand in. Clever. Good for chickens, since they need grit."

The man on my left, Emil Kreis, the publisher, muttered at my ear, "Ignore him. He backed three flops this season."

The girls, who had been coached by Fritz and Felix that afternoon, handled the green turtle soup without a splash. When they had brought in the soup plates Felix brought the bowl, and each girl ladled from it as Felix held it by the plate. I asked Pyle cordially, "Any sand?" but he said no, it was delicious, and cleaned it up.

I was relieved when I saw that the girls wouldn't dish the fish —flounders poached in dry white wine, with a mussel-and-mushroom sauce that was one of Fritz's specialties. Felix did the dishing at a side table, and the girls merely carried. With the first taste of the sauce there were murmurs of appreciation, and Adrian Dart, the actor, across from Wolfe, sang out, "Superb!" They were making various noises of satisfaction, and Leacraft, the lawyer, was asking Wolfe if Fritz would be willing to give him the recipe, when Pyle, on my right, made a face and dropped his fork on his plate with a clatter.

I thought he was putting on an act, and still thought so when his head drooped and I heard him gnash his teeth, but then his shoulders sagged and he clapped a hand to his mouth, and that seemed to be overdoing it. Two or three of them

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said something, and he pushed his chair back, got to his feet, said, "You must excuse me, I'm sorry," and headed for the door to the hall. Schriver arose and followed him out. The others exchanged words and glances.

Hewitt said, "A damn shame, but I'm going to finish this," and used his fork. Someone asked if Pyle had a bad heart, and someone else said no. They all resumed with the flounder and the conversation, but the spirit wasn't the same.

When, at a signal from Felix, the maidens started removing the plates, Lewis Hewitt got up and left the room, came back in a couple of minutes, sat, and raised his voice. "Vincent is in considerable pain. There is nothing we can do, and Ben wishes us to proceed. He will rejoin us when—when he can."

"What is it?" someone asked.

Hewitt said the doctor didn't know. Zoltan entered bearing an enormous covered platter, and the Hebes gathered at the side table, and Felix lifted the cover and began serving the roast pheasant, which had been larded with strips of pork soaked for twenty hours in Tokay, and then—but no. What's the use? The annual dinner of the Ten for Aristology was a flop. Since for years I have been eating three meals a day cooked by Fritz Brenner I would like to show my appreciation by getting in print some idea of what he can do in the way of victuals, but it won't do here. Sure, the pheasant was good enough for gods if there had been any around, and so was the suckling pig, and the salad, with a dressing which Fritz calls Devil's Rain, and the chestnut croquettes, and the cheese—only the one kind, made in New Jersey by a man named Bill Thompson under Fritz's supervision; and they were all eaten, more or less. But Hewitt left the room three more times and the last time was gone a good ten minutes, and Schriver didn't rejoin the party at all, and while the salad was being served Emil Kreis went out and didn't come back.

When, as coffee and brandy were being poured and cigars and cigarettes passed, Hewitt left his chair for the fifth time, Nero Wolfe got up and followed him out. I lit a cigar just to be doing something, and tried to be sociable by giving an ear to a story Adrian Dart was telling, but by the time I finished my coffee I was getting fidgety. By the glower that had been deepening on Wolfe's face for the past hour I knew he was boiling, and when he's like that, especially away from home, there's no telling about him. He might even have had the idea of aiming the glower at Vincent Pyle for ruining Fritz's meal. So I put what was left of the cigar in a tray, arose, and headed for the door, and was halfway to it when here he came, still glowering.

"Come with me," he snapped, and kept going.

The way to the kitchen from the

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dining room was through a pantry, twenty feet long, with counters and shelves and cupboards on both sides. Wolfe marched through with me behind. In the kitchen the twelve maidens were scattered around on chairs and stools at tables and counters, eating. A woman was busy at a sink. Zoltan was busy at a refrigerator. Fritz, who was pouring a glass of wine, presumably for himself, turned as Wolfe entered and put the bottle down.

Wolfe went to him, stood, and spoke. "Fritz. I offer my apologies. I permitted Mr. Hewitt to cajole you. I should have known better. I beg your pardon."

Fritz gestured with his free hand, the wineglass steady in the other. "But it is not to pardon, only to regret. The man got sick, that's a pity, only not from my cooking. I assure you."

"You don't need to. Not from your cooking as it left you, but as it reached him. I repeat that I am culpable, but I won't dwell on that now; it can wait. There is an aspect that is exigent." Wolfe turned. "Archie. Are those women all here?"

I had to cover more than half a circle to count them, scattered as they were. "Yes, sir, all present. Twelve."

"Collect them. They can stand"—he pointed to the alcove—"over there. And bring Felix."

It was hard to believe. They were eating; and for him to interrupt a man, or even a woman, at a meal, was unheard of. Not even me. Only in an extreme emergency had he ever asked me to quit food before I was through. Boiling was no name for it. Without even bothering to raise a brow, I turned and called out, "I'm sorry, ladies, but if Mr. Wolfe says it's urgent that settles it. Over there, please? All of you."

Then I went through the pantry corridor, pushed the two-way door, caught Felix's eye, and wiggled a beckoning finger at him, and he came. By the time we got to the kitchen the girls had left the chairs and stools and were gathering at the alcove, but not with enthusiasm. There were mutterings, and some dirty looks for me as I approached with Felix. Wolfe came, with Zoltan and stood, tight-lipped, surveying them.

"I remind you," he said, "that the first course you brought to the table was caviar on blinis topped with sour cream. The portion served to Mr. Vincent Pyle, and eaten by him, contained arsenic. Mr. Pyle is in bed upstairs, attended by three doctors, and will probably die within an hour. I am speaking—"

He stopped to glare at them. They were reacting, or acting, no matter which. There were gasps and exclamations, and one of them clutched her throat, and another, baring her arms, clapped her palms to her ears. When the glare had restored order Wolfe went on, "You will please keep quiet and listen. I am speaking of conclusions formed

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by me. My conclusion that Mr. Pyle ate arsenic is based on the symptoms—burning throat, faintness, intense burning pain in the stomach, dry mouth, cool skin, vomiting. My conclusion that the arsenic was in the first course is based, first, on the amount of time it takes arsenic to act; second, on the fact that it is highly unlikely it could have been put in the soup or the fish; and third, that Mr. Pyle complained of sand in the cream or caviar. I admit the possibility that one or both of my conclusions will be proven wrong, but I regard it as remote and I am acting on them." His head turned. "Fritz. Tell me about the caviar from the moment it was put on the individual plates. Who did that?"

I had once told Fritz that I could imagine no circumstances in which he would look really unhappy, but now I wouldn't have to try. He was biting his lips, first the lower and then the upper. He began, "I must assure you—"

"I need no assurance from you, Fritz. Who put it on the plates?"

"Zoltan and I did." He pointed. "At that table."

"And left them there? They were taken from that table by the women?"

"Yes, sir."

"Each woman took one plate?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, they were told to. I was at the range."

Zoltan spoke up. "I watched them, Mr. Wolfe. They each took one plate. And believe me, nobody put any arsenic—"

"Please, Zoltan. I add another conclusion: that no one put arsenic in one of the portions and then left to chance which one of the guests would get it. Surely the poisoner intended it to reach a certain one—either Mr. Pyle, or, as an alternative, some other one and it went to Mr. Pyle by mishap. In any case, it was the portion Pyle ate that was poisoned, and whether he got it by design or by mischance is for the moment irrelevant." His eyes were at the girls. "Which one of you took that plate to Mr. Pyle?"

No reply. No sound, no movement.

Wolfe grunted. "Pfui. If you didn't know his name, you do now. The man who left during the fish course and who is now dying. Who served him?"

No reply; and I had to hand it to them that no pair of eyes left Wolfe to fasten on Peggy Choate, the redhead. Mine did. "What the heck," I said. "Speak up, Miss Choate."

"I didn't!" she cried.

"That's silly. Of course you did. Twenty people can swear to it. I looked right at you while you were dishing his soup. And when you brought the fish—"

"But I didn't take him that first thing! He already had some!"

Wolfe took over. "Your name is Choate?"

"Yes." Her chin was up. "Peggy Choate."

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"You deny that you served the plate of caviar, the first course, to Mr. Pyle?"

"I certainly do."

"But you were supposed to? You were assigned to him?"

"Yes. I took the plate from the table there and went in with it, and started to him, and then I saw that he had some, and I thought I had made a mistake. We hadn't seen the guests. That man"—she pointed to Felix—"had shown us which chair our guest would sit in, and mine was the second from the right on this side as I went in, but that one had already been served, and I thought someone else had made a mistake or I was mixed up. Anyway, I saw that the man next to him, on his right, hadn't been served, and I gave it to him. That was you. I gave it to you."

"Indeed." Wolfe was frowning at her. "Who was assigned to me?"

That wasn't put on. He actually didn't know. He had never looked at her. He had been irritated that females were serving, and besides, he hates to twist his neck. Of course I could have told him, but Helen Iacono said, "I was."

"Your name, please?"

"Helen Iacono." She had a rich contralto that went fine with the deep dark eyes and dark velvet skin and wavy silky hair.

"Did you bring me the first course?"

"No. When I went in I saw Peggy serving you, and a man on the left next to the end didn't have any, so I gave it to him."

"Do you know his name?"

"I do," Nora Jaret said. "From the card. He was mine." Her big brown eyes were straight at Wolfe. "His name is Kreis. He had his when I got there. I was going to take it back to the kitchen, but then I thought, someone had stage fright but I haven't, and I gave it to the man at the end."

"Which end?"

"The left end. Mr. Schriver. He came and spoke to us this afternoon."

She was corroborated by Carol Annis, the one with hair like corn silk who had no sense of humor. "That's right," she said. "I saw her. I was going to stop her, but she had already put the plate down, so I went around to the other side of the table with it when I saw that Adrian Dart didn't have any. I didn't mind because it was him."

"You were assigned to Mr. Schriver?"

"Yes. I served him the other courses, until he left."

It was turning into a ring-around-a-rosy, but the squat was bound to come. All Wolfe had to do was get to one who couldn't claim a delivery, and that would tag her. I was rather hoping it wouldn't be the next one, for the girl with the throaty voice had been Adrian Dart's, and she had called me Archie and had given Helen Iacono a nice tribute. Would she

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claim she had served Dart herself?

No. She answered without being asked. "My name is Lucy Morgan," she said, "and I had Adrian Dart, and Carol got to him before I did. There was only one place that didn't have one, on Dart's left, the next but one, and I took it there. I don't know his name."

I supplied it. "Hewitt. Mr. Lewis Hewitt." A better name for it than ring-around-a-rosy would have been passing-the-buck. I looked at Fern Faber, the tall blonde with a wide lazy mouth who had been my first stop on my phone-number tour. "It's your turn, Miss Faber," I told her. "You had Mr. Hewitt. Yes?"

"I sure did." Her voice was pitched so high it threatened to squeak.

"But you didn't take him his caviar?"

"I sure didn't."

"Then who did you take it to?"

"Nobody."

I looked at Wolfe. His eyes were narrowed at her. "What did you do with it, Miss Faber?"

"I didn't do anything with it. There wasn't any."

"Nonsense. There are twelve of you, and there were twelve at the table, and each got a portion. How can you say there wasn't any?"

"Because there wasn't. I was in the john fixing my hair, and when I came back in she was taking the last one from the table, and when I asked where mine was he said he didn't know, and I went to the dining room and they all had some."

"Who was taking the last one from the table?"

She pointed to Lucy Morgan.

"Whom did you ask where yours was?"

She pointed to Zoltan. "Him."

Wolfe turned. "Zoltan?"

"Yes, sir. I mean, yes, sir, she asked where hers was. I had turned away when the last one was taken. I don't mean I know where she had been, just that she asked me that. I asked Fritz if I should go in and see if they were one short and he said no, Felix was there and would see to it."

Wolfe went back to Fern Faber. "Where is that room where you were fixing your hair?"

She pointed toward the pantry. "In there."

"The door's around the corner," Felix said.

"How long were you in there?"

"My God, I don't know, do you think I timed it? When Archie Goodwin was talking to us, and Mr. Schriver came and said they were going to start, I went pretty soon after that."

Wolfe's head jerked to me. "So that's where you were. I might have known there were young women around. Supposing that Miss Faber went to fix her hair shortly after you left—say three minutes—how long was she at it, if the last plate had been taken from the table when she returned to the kitchen?"

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I gave it a thought. "Fifteen to twenty minutes."

He growled at her, "What was wrong with your hair?"

"I didn't say anything was wrong with it." She was getting riled. "Look, Mister, do you want all the details?"

"No." Wolfe surveyed them for a moment, not amiably, took in enough air to fill all his middle—say two bushels—let it out again, turned his back on them, saw the glass of wine Fritz had left on a table, went and picked it up, smelled it, and stood gazing at it. The girls started to make noises, and, hearing them, he put the glass down and came back.

"You're in a pickle," he said. "So am I. You heard me apologize to Mr. Brenner and avow my responsibility for his undertaking to cook that meal. When, upstairs, I saw that Mr. Pyle would die, and reached the conclusions I told you of, I felt myself under compulsion to expose the culprit. I am committed. When I came down here I thought it would be a simple matter to learn who had served poisoned food to Mr. Pyle, but I was wrong.

"It's obvious now that I have to deal with one who is not only resourceful and ingenious, but also quick-witted and audacious. While I was closing in on her just now, as I thought, inexorably approaching the point where she would either have to contradict one of you or deny that she had served the first course to anyone, she was fleering at me inwardly, and with reason, for her coup had worked. She had slipped through my fingers, and—"

"But she didn't!" It came from one of them whose name I didn't have. "She said she didn't serve anybody!"

Wolfe shook his head. "No. Not Miss Faber. She is the only one who is eliminated. She says she was absent from this room during the entire period when the plates were being taken from the table, and she wouldn't dare to say that if she had in fact been here and taken a plate and carried it in to Mr. Pyle. She would certainly have been seen by some of you."

He shook his head again. "Not her. But it could have been any other one of you. You—I speak now to that one, still to be identified—you must have extraordinary faith in your attendant godling, even allowing for your craft. For you took great risks. You took a plate from the table—not the first probably, but one of the first—and on your way to the dining room you put arsenic in the cream. That wasn't difficult; you might even have done it without stopping if you had the arsenic in a paper spill. You could get rid of the spill later, perhaps in the room which Miss Faber calls a john. You took the plate to Mr. Pyle, came back here immediately, got another plate, took it to the dining room, and gave it to one who had

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not been served. I am not guessing; it had to be like that. It was a remarkably adroit stratagem, but you can't possibly be impregnable."

He turned to Zoltan. "You say you watched as the plates were taken, and each of them took only one. Did one of them come back and take another?"

Zoltan looked fully as unhappy as Fritz. "I'm thinking, Mr. Wolfe. I can try to think, but I'm afraid it won't help. I didn't look at their faces, and they're all dressed alike. I guess I didn't watch very close."

"Fritz?"

"No, sir. I was at the range."

"Then try this, Zoltan. Who were the first ones to take plates—the first three or four?"

Zoltan slowly shook his head. "I'm afraid it's no good, Mr. Wolfe. I could try to think, but I couldn't be sure." He moved his eyes right to left and back again, at the girls. "I tell you, I wasn't looking at their faces." He extended his hands, palms up. "You will consider, Mr. Wolfe, I was not thinking of poison. I was only seeing that the plates were carried properly. Was I thinking which one has got arsenic? No."

"I took the first plate," a girl blurted—another whose name I didn't know. "I took it in and gave it to the man in my chair, the one at the left corner at the other side of the table, and I stayed there. I never left the dining room."

"Your name, please?"

"Marjorie Quinn."

"Thank you. Now the second plate. Who took it?"

Apparently nobody. Wolfe gave them ten seconds, his eyes moving to take them all in, his lips tight. "I advise you," he said, "to jog your memories, in case it becomes necessary to establish the order in which you took the plates by dragging it out of you. I hope it won't come to that." His head turned. "Felix, I have neglected you purposely, to give you time to reflect. You were in the dining room. My expectation was that after I had learned who had served the first course to Mr. Pyle you would corroborate it, but now that there is nothing for you to corroborate I must look to you for the fact itself. I must ask you to point her out."

In a way Wolfe was Felix's boss. When Wolfe's oldest and dearest friend, Marko Vukcic, who had owned Rusterman's restaurant, had died, his will had left the restaurant to members of the staff in trust, with Wolfe as the trustee, and Felix was the maître d'hôtel. With that job at the best restaurant in New York, naturally Felix was both bland and commanding, but now he was neither. If he felt the way he looked, he was miserable.

"I can't," he said.

"Pfui! You, trained as you are to see everything?"

"That is true, Mr. Wolfe. I knew you would ask me this, but I can't. I can only explain. The young

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woman who just spoke, Marjorie Quinn, was the first one in with a plate, as she said. She did not say that as she served it one of the blinis slid off onto the table, but it did. As I sprang toward her she was actually about to pick it up with her fingers, and I jerked her away and put it back on the plate with a fork, and I gave her a look. Anyway, I was not myself. Having women as waiters was bad enough, and not only that, they were without experience. When I recovered command of myself I saw the red-headed one, Choate, standing back of Mr. Pyle, to whom she had been assigned, with a plate in her hand, and I saw that he had already been served. As I moved forward she stepped to the right and served the plate to you. The operation was completely upset, and I was helpless. The dark-skinned one, Iacono, who was assigned to you, served Mr. Kreis, and the—"

"If you please." Wolfe was curt. "I have heard them, and so have you. I have always found you worthy of trust, but it's possible that in your exalted position, maître d'hôtel at Rusterman's, you would rather dodge than get involved in a poisoning. Are you dodging, Felix?"

"Good God, Mr. Wolfe, I *am* involved!"

"Very well. I saw that woman spill the blini and start her fingers for it, and I saw you retrieve it. Yes, you're involved, but not as I am." He turned to me. "Archie. You are commonly my first resort, but now you are my last. You sat next to Mr. Pyle. Who put that plate before him?"

Of course I knew that was coming, but I hadn't been beating my brain because there was no use. I said merely but positively, "No." He glared at me and I added, "That's all, just no, but like Felix I can explain. First, I would have had to turn around to see her face, and that's bad table manners. Second, I was watching Felix rescue the blini. Third, there was an argument going on about flowers with spots and streaks, and I was listening to it and so were you. I didn't even see her arm."

Wolfe stood and breathed. He shut his eyes and opened them again, and breathed some more. "Incredible," he muttered. "The wretch had incredible luck."

"I'm going home," Fern Faber said. "I'm tired."

"So am I," another one said, and was moving, but Wolfe's eyes pinned her. "I advise you not to," he said. "It is true that Miss Faber is eliminated as the culprit, and also Miss Quinn, since she was under surveillance by Felix while Mr. Pyle was being served, but I advise even them to stay. When Mr. Pyle dies the doctors will certainly summon the police, and it would be well for all of you to be here when they arrive. I had hoped to be able to present them with an exposed murder-

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er. Confound it! There is still a chance. Archie, come with me. Fritz, Felix, Zoltan, remain with these women. If one or more of them insist on leaving do not detain them by force, but have the names and the times of departure. If they want to eat, feed them. I'll be—"

"I'm going home," Fern Faber said stubbornly.

"Very well, go. You'll be got out of bed by a policeman before the night's out. I'll be in the dining room, Fritz. Come, Archie."

He went and I followed, along the pantry corridor and through the two-way door. On the way I glanced at my wrist watch: ten past eleven. I rather expected to find the dining room empty, but it wasn't. Eight of them were still there, the only ones missing being Schriver and Hewitt, who were probably upstairs. The air was heavy with cigar smoke. All of them but Adrian Dart were at the table with their chairs pushed back at various angles, with brandy glasses and cigars. Dart was standing with his back to a picture of honkers on the wing, holding forth. As we entered he stopped and heads turned.

Emil Kreis spoke. "Oh, there you are. I was coming to the kitchen but didn't want to butt in. Schriver asked me to apologize to Fritz Brenner. Our custom is to ask the chef to join us with champagne, which is barbarous but gay, but of course in the circumstances . . ." He let it hang, and added, "Shall I explain to him? Or will you?"

"I will." Wolfe went to the end of the table and sat. He had been on his feet for nearly two hours—all very well for his twice-a-day sessions in the plant rooms, but not elsewhere. He looked around. "Mr. Pyle is still alive?"

"We hope so," one said. "We sincerely hope so."

"I ought to be home in bed," another one said. "I have a hard day tomorrow. But it doesn't seem . . ." He took a puff on his cigar.

Emil Kreis reached for the brandy bottle. "There's been no word since I came down." He looked at his wrist. "Nearly an hour ago. I suppose I should go up. It's so damned unpleasant." He poured brandy.

"Terrible," one said. "Absolutely terrible. I understand you were asking which one of the girls brought him the caviar. Kreis says you asked him."

Wolfe nodded. "I also asked Mr. Schriver and Mr. Hewitt. And Mr. Goodwin and Mr. Brenner, and the two men who came to help at my request. And the women themselves. After more than an hour with them I am still at fault. I have discovered the artifice the culprit used, but not her identity."

"Aren't you a bit premature?" Leacraft, the lawyer, asked. "There may be no culprit. An acute and severe gastric disturbance may be caused—"

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"Nonsense. I am too provoked for civility, Mr. Leacraft. The symptoms are typical of arsenic, and you heard Mr. Pyle complain of sand, but that's not all. I said I have discovered the artifice. None of them will admit serving him the first course. The one assigned to him found he had already been served and served me instead. There is indeed a culprit. She put arsenic in the cream *en passant,* served it to Mr. Pyle, returned to the kitchen for another portion, and came and served it to someone else. That is established."

"But then," the lawyer objected, "one of them served no one. How could that be?"

"I am not a tyro at inquiry, Mr. Leacraft. I'll ravel it for you later if you want, but now I want to get on. It is no conjecture that poison was given to Mr. Pyle by the woman who brought him the caviar; it is a fact. By a remarkable combination of cunning and luck she has so far eluded identification, and I am appealing to you. All of you. I ask you to close your eyes and recall the scene. We are here at table, discussing the orchids—the spots and streaks. The woman serving that place"—he pointed—"lets a blini slip from the plate and Felix retrieves it. It helps to close your eyes. Just about then a woman enters with a plate, goes to Mr. Pyle, and puts it before him. I appeal to you: which one?"

Emil Kreis shook his head. "I told you upstairs, I don't know. I didn't see her. Or if I did, it didn't register."

Adrian Dart, the actor, stood with his eyes closed, his chin up, and his arms folded, a fine pose for concentration. The others, even Leacraft, had their eyes closed too, but of course they couldn't hold a candle to Dart. After a long moment the eyes began to open and heads to shake.

"It's gone," Dart said in his rich musical baritone. "I must have seen it, since I sat across from him, but it's gone. Utterly."

"I didn't see it," another said. "I simply didn't see it."

"I have a vague feeling," another said, "but it's too damn vague. No."

They made it unanimous.

Wolfe put his palms on the table. "Then I'm in for it," he said grimly. "I am your guest, gentlemen, and would not be offensive, but I am to blame that Fritz Brenner was enticed to this deplorable fiasco. If Mr. Pyle dies, as he surely will—"

The door opened and Benjamin Schriver entered. Then Lewis Hewitt, and then the familiar burly frame of Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Manhattan Homicide West.

Schriver crossed to the table and spoke. "Vincent is dead. Half an hour ago. Doctor Jameson called the police. He thinks that it is practically certain—"

"Hold it," Purley growled at his elbow. "I'll handle it if you don't mind."

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"My God," Adrian Dart groaned, and shuddered magnificently.

That was the last I heard of the affair from an aristologist.

"I did not!" Inspector Cramer roared. "Quit twisting my words around! I didn't charge you with complicity! I merely said you're concealing something, and what the hell is that to scrape your neck? You always do!"

It was a quarter to two Wednesday afternoon. We were in the office on the first floor of the old brownstone on West 35th Street—Wolfe in his oversized chair. The daily schedule was messed beyond repair. When we had finally got home, at five o'clock in the morning, Wolfe had told Fritz to forget about breakfast until further notice, and had sent me up to the plant rooms to leave a note for Theodore saying that he would not appear at nine in the morning and perhaps not at all. It had been not at all. At half-past eleven he had buzzed on the house phone to tell Fritz to bring up the breakfast tray with four eggs and ten slices of bacon instead of two and five, and it was past one o'clock when the sounds came of his elevator and then his footsteps in the hall, heading for the office.

If you think a problem child is tough, try handling a problem elephant. He is plenty knotty even when he is himself, and that day he was really special. After looking through the mail, glancing at his desk calendar, and signing three checks I had put on his desk, he snapped at me, "A fine prospect. Dealing with them singly would be interminable. Will you have them all here at six o'clock?"

I kept calm. I merely asked, "All of whom?"

"You know quite well. Those women."

I still kept calm. "I should think ten of them would be enough. You said yourself that two of them can be crossed off."

"I need them all. Those two can help establish the order in which the plates were taken."

I held on. I too was short on sleep, shorter even than he, and I didn't feel up to a fracas. "I have a suggestion," I said. "I suggest that you postpone operations until your wires are connected again. Counting up to five hundred might help. You know damn well that all twelve of them will spend the afternoon either at the District Attorney's office or receiving official callers at their homes—probably most of them at the D.A.'s office. And probably they'll spend the evening there too. Do you want some aspirin?"

"I want *them*," he growled.

I could have left him to grope back to normal on his own and gone up to my room for a nap, but after all he pays my salary. So I picked up a sheet of paper I had typed and got up and handed it to him. It read:

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	Assigned to	*Served*
Peggy Choate	Pyle	Wolfe
Helen Iacono	Wolfe	Kreis
Nora Jaret	Kreis	Schriver
Carol Annis	Schriver	Dart
Lucy Morgan	Dart	Hewitt
Fern Faber	Hewitt	No one

"Fern Faber's out," I said, "and I realize it doesn't have to be one of those five, even though Lucy Morgan took the last plate. Possibly one or two others took plates after Peggy Choate did, and served the men they were assigned to. But it seems —"

I stopped because he had crumpled it and dropped it in the wastebasket. "I heard them," he growled. "My faculties, including my memory, are not impaired. I am merely ruffled beyond the bounds of tolerance."

For him that was an abject apology, and a sign that he was beginning to regain control. But a few minutes later, when the bell rang, and after a look through the one-way glass panel of the front door I told him it was Cramer, and he said to admit him, and Cramer marched in and planted his fanny on the red leather chair and opened up with an impolite remark about concealing facts connected with a murder, Wolfe had cut loose; and Cramer asked him what the hell was that to scrape his neck, which was a new one to me but sounded somewhat vulgar for an Inspector. He had probably picked it up from some hoodlum.

Ruffling Cramer beyond the bounds of tolerance did Wolfe good. He leaned back in his chair. "Everyone conceals something," he said placidly. "Or at least omits something, if only because to include everything is impossible. During those wearisome hours, nearly six of them, I answered all questions, and so did Mr. Goodwin. Indeed, I thought we were helpful. I thought we had cleared away some rubble."

"Yeah." Cramer wasn't grateful. His big pink face was always a little pinker than normal, not with pleasure, when he was tackling Wolfe. "You had witnessed the commission of a murder, and you didn't notify—"

"It wasn't a murder until he died."

"All right, a felony. You not only failed to report it, you—"

"That a felony had been committed was my conclusion. Others present disagreed with me. Only a few minutes before Mr. Stebbins entered the room, Mr. Leacraft, a member of the bar and therefore himself an officer of the law, challenged my conclusion."

"You should have reported it. You're a licensed detective. Also

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you started an investigation, questioning the suspects—"

"Only to test my conclusion. I would have been a ninny to report it before learning—"

"Damn it," Cramer barked, "will you let me finish a sentence? Just one?"

Wolfe's shoulders went up an eighth of an inch and down again. "Certainly, if it has import. I am not baiting you, Mr. Cramer. But I have already replied to these imputations, to you and Mr. Stebbins and an Assistant District Attorney. I did not wrongly delay reporting a crime, and I did not usurp the function of the police. Very well, finish a sentence."

"You knew Pyle was dying. You said so."

"Also my own conclusion. The doctors were trying to save him."

Cramer took a breath. He looked at me, saw nothing inspiring, and returned to Wolfe. "I'll tell you why I'm here. Those three men—the cook, the man that helped him, and the man in the dining room—Fritz Brenner, Felix Courbet, and Zoltan Mahany—were all supplied by you. All close to you. I want to know about them, or at least two of them. I might as well leave Fritz out of it. In the first place, it's hard to believe that Zoltan doesn't know who took the first two or three plates or whether one of them came back for a second one, and it's also hard to believe that Felix doesn't know who served Pyle."

"It is indeed," Wolfe agreed. "They are highly trained men. But they have been questioned."

"They sure have. It's also hard to believe that Goodwin didn't see who served Pyle. He sees everything."

"Mr. Goodwin is present. Discuss it with him."

"I have. Now I want to ask your opinion of a theory. I know yours, and I don't reject it, but there are alternatives. First, a fact. In a metal trash container in the kitchen—not a garbage pail—we found a small roll of paper, ordinary white paper that had been rolled into a tube, held with tape, smaller at one end. The laboratory has found particles of arsenic inside. The only two fingerprints on it that are any good are Zoltan's. He says he saw it on the kitchen floor under a table some time after the meal had started, he can't say exactly when, and he picked it up and dropped it in the container, and his prints are on it because he pinched it to see if there was anything in it."

Wolfe nodded. "As I surmised. A paper spill."

"Yeah. I don't say it kills your theory. She could have shaken it into the cream without leaving prints, and she certainly wouldn't have dropped it on the floor if there was any chance it had her prints. But it *has* got Zoltan's. What's wrong with the theory that Zoltan poisoned one of the portions and saw that it was taken by a certain

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one? I'll answer that myself. There are two things wrong with it. First, Zoltan claims he didn't know which guest any of the girls were assigned to. But Felix knew, and they could have been in collusion. Second, the girls all deny that Zoltan indicated which plate they were to take, but you know how that is. He could have done it without her knowing it. What else is wrong with it?"

"It's not only untenable, it's egregious," Wolfe declared. "Why, in that case, did one of them come back for another plate?"

"She was confused. Nervous. Dumb."

"Bosh. Why doesn't she admit it?"

"Scared."

"I don't believe it. I questioned them before you did." Wolfe waved it away. "Tommyrot, and you know it. My theory is not a theory; it is a reasoned conviction. I hope it is being acted on. I suggested to Mr. Stebbins that he examine their garments to see if some kind of pocket had been made in one of them. She had to have it readily available."

"He did. They all had pockets. The laboratory has found no trace of arsenic." Cramer uncrossed his legs. "But I wanted to ask you about those men. You know them."

"I do, yes. But I do not answer for them. They may have a dozen murders on their souls, but they had nothing to do with the death of Mr. Pyle. If you are following up my theory—my conviction, rather—I suppose you have learned the order in which the women took the plates."

Cramer shook his head. "We have not, and I doubt if we will. All we have is a bunch of contradictions. You had them good and scared before we got to them. We do have the last five, starting with Peggy Choate, who found that Pyle had been served and gave it to you, and then—but you got that yourself."

"No. I got those five, but not that they were the last. There might have been others in between."

"There weren't. It's pretty well settled that these five were the last. After Peggy Choate the last four plates were taken by Helen Iacono, Nora Jaret, Carol Annis, and Lucy Morgan. Then that Fern Faber, who had been in the can, but there was no plate for her. It's the order in which they took them before that, the first seven, that we can't pry out of them—except the first one, that Marjorie Quinn. You couldn't either."

Wolfe turned a palm up. "I was interrupted."

"You were not. You left them there in a huddle, scared stiff, and went to the dining room to start in on the men. Your own private murder investigation, and to hell with the law. I was surprised to see Goodwin here when I rang the bell just now. I supposed you'd have

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him out running errands like calling at the agency they got the girls from. Or getting a line on Pyle to find a connection between him and one of them. Unless you're no longer interested?"

"I'm interested willy-nilly," Wolfe declared. "As I told the Assistant District Attorney, it is on my score that a man was poisoned in food prepared by Fritz Brenner. But I do not send Mr. Goodwin on fruitless errands. He is one and you have dozens, and if anything is to be learned at the agency or by inquiry into Mr. Pyle's associations your army will dig it up. They're already at it, of course, but if they had started a trail you wouldn't be here. If I send Mr. Goodwin—"

The doorbell rang and I got up and went to the hall. At the rear the door to the kitchen swung open part way and Fritz poked his head through, saw me, and withdrew. Turning to the front for a look through the panel, I saw that I had exaggerated when I told Wolfe that all twelve of them would be otherwise engaged. At least one wasn't. There on the stoop was Helen Iacono.

It had sounded to me as if Cramer had about said his say and would soon be moving along, and if he bumped into Helen Iacono in the hall she might be too embarrassed to give me her phone number, if that was what she had come for; so as I opened the door I pressed a finger to my lips and *sshh*ed at her, and then crooked the finger to motion her in. Her deep dark eyes looked a little startled, but she stepped across the sill, and I shut the door, turned, opened the first door on the left, to the front room, motioned to her to enter, followed, and closed the door.

"What's the matter?" she whispered.

"Nothing now," I told her. "This is soundproofed. There's a police inspector in the office with Mr. Wolfe and I thought you might have had enough of cops for now. But if you want to meet him—"

"I don't. I want to see Nero Wolfe."

"Okay, I'll tell him as soon as the cop goes. Have a seat. It shouldn't be long."

There is a connecting door between the front room and the office, but I went around through the hall, and here came Cramer. He was marching by without even the courtesy of a grunt, but I stepped to the front to let him out, and then went to the office and told Wolfe, "I've got one of them in the front room. Helen Iacono, the tawny-skinned Hebe who had you but gave her caviar to Kreis. Shall I keep her while I get the rest of them?"

He made a face. "What does she want?"

"To see you."

He took a breath. "Confound it. Bring her in."

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I went and opened the connecting door, told her to come, and escorted her across to the red leather chair. She was more ornamental in it than Cramer, but not nearly as impressive as she had been at first sight. She was puffy around the eyes and her skin had lost some glow. She told Wolfe she hadn't had any sleep. She said she had just left the District Attorney's office, and if she went home her mother would be at her again, and her brothers and sisters would come home from school and make noise, and anyway she had decided she had to see Wolfe. Her mother was old-fashioned and didn't want her to be an actress. It was beginning to sound as if what she was after was a place to take a nap, but then Wolfe got a word in.

He said drily, "I didn't suppose, Miss Iacono, you came to consult me about your career."

"Oh, no. I came because you're a detective and you're very clever and I'm afraid. I'm afraid they'll find out something I did, and if they do I won't have any career. My parents won't let me even if I'm still alive. I nearly gave it away already when they were asking me questions. So I decided to tell you about it and then if you'd help me I'll help you. If you promise to keep my secret."

"I can't promise to keep a secret if it is a guilty one—if it is a confession of a crime or knowledge of one."

"It isn't."

"Then you have my promise, and Mr. Goodwin's. We have kept many secrets."

"All right. I stabbed Vincent Pyle with a knife and got blood on me."

I stared. For half a second I thought she meant that he hadn't died of poison at all, that she had sneaked upstairs and stuck a knife in him, which seemed unlikely since the doctors would probably have found the hole.

Apparently she wasn't going on, and Wolfe spoke. "Ordinarily, Miss Iacono, stabbing a man is considered a crime. When and where did this happen?"

"It wasn't a crime because it was in self-defense." Her rich contralto was as composed as if she had been telling us the multiplication table. Evidently she saved the inflections for her career. She was continuing. "It happened in January, about three months ago. Of course I knew about him—everybody in show business does. I don't know if it's true that he backs shows just so he can get girls, but it might as well be. There's a lot of talk about the girls he gets, but nobody really knows because he was always very careful about it. Some of the girls have talked but he never did. I don't mean just taking them out, I mean the last ditch. We say that on Broadway. You know what I mean?"

"I can surmise."

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"Sometimes we say the last stitch, but it means the same thing. Early last winter he began on me. Of course I knew about his reputation, but he was backing *Jack in the Pulpit* and they were about to start casting, and I didn't know it was going to be a flop, and if a girl expects to have a career she has to be sociable. I went out with him a few times, dinner and dancing and so forth, and then he asked me to his apartment, and I went. He cooked the dinner himself—I said he was very careful. Didn't I?"

"Yes."

"Well, he was. It's a penthouse on Madison Avenue, but no one else was there. I let him kiss me. I figured it like this, an actress gets kissed all the time on the stage and the screen and TV, and what's the difference? I went to his apartment three times and there was no real trouble, but the fourth time—that was in January—he turned into a beast right before my eyes, and I had to do something, and I grabbed a knife from the table and stabbed him with it. I got blood on my dress, and when I got home I tried to get it out but it left a stain. It cost forty-six dollars."

"But Mr. Pyle recovered."

"Oh, yes. I saw him a few times after that, I mean just by accident, but he barely spoke and so did I. I don't think he ever told anyone about it, but what if he did? What if the police find out about it?"

Wolfe grunted. "That would be regrettable, certainly. You would be pestered even more than you are now. But if you have been candid with me you are not in mortal jeopardy. The police are not simpletons. You wouldn't be arrested for murdering Mr. Pyle last night, let alone convicted, merely because you stabbed him in self-defense last January."

"Of course I wouldn't," she agreed. "That's not it. It's my mother and father. They'd find out about it because they would ask them questions, and if I'm going to have a career I would have to leave home and my family, and I don't want to. Don't you see?" She came forward in the chair. "But if they find out right away who did it, who poisoned him, that would end it and I'd be all right. Only I'm afraid they won't find out right away, but I think you could if I help you, and you said last night that you're committed. I can't offer to help the police because they'd wonder why."

"I see." Wolfe's eyes were narrowed at her. "How do you propose to help me?"

"Well, I figure it like this." She was on the edge of the chair. "The way you explained it last night, one of the girls poisoned him. She was one of the first ones to take a plate in, and then she came back and got another one. I don't quite understand why she did that, but you do, so all right. But if she came back for another plate that took a little

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time, and she must have been one of the last ones, and the police have got it worked out who were the last five. I know that because of the questions they asked this last time. So it was Peggy Choate or Nora Jaret or Carol Annis or Lucy Morgan."

"Or you."

"No, it wasn't me." Just matter-of-fact. "So it was one of them. And she didn't poison him just for nothing, did she? You'd have to have a very good reason to poison a man, I know I would. So all we have to do is find out which one had a good reason, and that's where I can help. I don't know Lucy Morgan, but I know Carol a little, and I know Nora and Peggy even better. And now we're in this together, and I can pretend to them I want to talk about it. I can talk about him because I had to tell the police I went out with him a few times, because I was seen with him and they'd find out, so I thought I'd better tell them. Dozens of girls went out with him, but he was so careful that nobody knows which ones went to the last ditch except the ones that talked. And I can find out which one of those four girls had a reason, and tell you, and that will end it."

I was congratulating myself that I hadn't got her phone number; and if I had got it, I would have crossed it off without a pang. I don't say that a girl must have true nobility of character before I'll buy her a lunch, but you have to draw the line somewhere. Thinking that Wolfe might be disgusted enough to put into words the way I felt, I horned in. "I have a suggestion, Miss Iacono. You could bring them here, all four of them, and let Mr. Wolfe talk it over with them. As you say, he's very clever."

She looked doubtful. "I don't believe that's a good idea. I think they'd be more apt to say things to me, just one at a time. Don't you think so, Mr. Wolfe?"

"You know them better than I do," he muttered. He was controlling himself.

"And then," she said, "when we find out which one had a reason, and we tell the police, I can say that I saw her going back to the kitchen for another plate. Of course just where I saw her, where she was and where I was, that will depend on who she is. I saw you, Mr. Wolfe, when I said you could if I helped you, I saw the look on your face. You didn't think a twenty-year-old girl could help, did you?"

He had my sympathy. Of course what he would have liked to say was that it might well be that a twenty-year-old hellcat could help, but that wouldn't have been tactful.

"I may have been a little skeptical," he conceded. "And it's possible that you're oversimplifying the problem. We have to consider all the factors. Take one: her plan must have been not only premeditated but also thoroughly rigged,

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since she had the poison ready. So she must have known that Mr. Pyle would be one of the guests. Did she?"

"Oh, yes. We all did. Mr. Buchman at the agency showed us a list of them and told us who they were, only of course he didn't have to tell us who Vincent Pyle was. That was about a month ago, so she had plenty of time to get the poison. Is arsenic very hard to get?"

"Not at all. It is in common use for many purposes. That is of course one of the police lines of inquiry, but she knew it would be and she is no bungler. Another point: when Mr. Pyle saw her there, serving food, wouldn't he have been on his guard?"

"But he didn't see her. They didn't see any of us before. She came up behind him and gave him that plate. Of course he saw her afterwards, but he had already eaten it."

Wolfe persisted. "But then? He was in agony, but he was conscious and could speak. Why didn't he denounce her?"

She gestured impatiently. "I guess you're not as clever as you're supposed to be. He didn't know she had done it. When he saw her she was serving another man, and—"

"What other man?"

"How do I know? Only it wasn't you, because I served you. And anyway, maybe he didn't know she wanted to kill him. Of course she had a good reason, I know that, but maybe he didn't know she felt like that. A man doesn't know how a girl feels—anyhow, some girls. Look at me. He didn't know I would never dream of going to the last ditch. He thought I would give up my honor and my virtue just to get a part in that play he was backing, and anyhow it was a flop." She gestured again. "I thought you wanted to get her. All you do is make objections."

Wolfe rubbed the side of his nose. "I do want to get her, Miss Iacono. I intend to. But like Mr. Pyle, though from a different motive, I am very careful. I can't afford to botch it. I fully appreciate your offer to help. You didn't like Mr. Goodwin's suggestion that you get them here in a body for discussion with me, and you may be right. But I don't like your plan, for you to approach them singly and try to pump them. Our quarry is a malign and crafty harpy, and I will not be a party to your peril. I propose an alternative. Arrange for Mr. Goodwin to see them, together with you. Being a trained investigator, he knows how to beguile, and the peril, if any, will be his. If they are not available at the moment, arrange it for this evening—but not here. Perhaps one of them has a suitable apartment, or if not, a private room at some restaurant would do. At my expense, of course. Will you?"

It was her turn to make objections, and she had several. But when Wolfe met them, and made

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it plain that he would accept her as a colleague only if she accepted his alternative, she finally gave in. She would phone to let me know how she was making out with the arrangements. From her manner, when she got up to go, you might have thought she had been shopping for some little item, say a handbag, and had graciously deferred to the opinion of the clerk. After I graciously escorted her out and saw her descend the seven steps to the sidewalk, I returned to the office and found Wolfe sitting with his eyes closed and his fists planted on the chair arms.

"Even money," I said.

"On what?" he growled.

"On her against the field. She knows damn well who had a good reason and exactly what it was. It was getting too hot for comfort and she decided that the best way to duck was to wish it on some dear friend."

His eyes opened. "She would, certainly. A woman whose conscience has no sting will stop at nothing. But why come to me? Why didn't she cook her own stew and serve it to the police?"

"I don't know, but for a guess she was afraid the cops would get too curious and find out how she had saved her honor and her virtue and tell her mother and father, and father would spank her. Shall I also guess why you proposed your alternative instead of having her bring them here for you?"

"She wouldn't. She said so."

"Of course she would, if you had insisted. That's your guess. Mine is that you're not desperate enough yet to take on five females in a bunch. When you told me to bring the whole dozen you knew darned well it couldn't be done, not even by me. Okay, I want instructions."

"Later," he muttered, and closed his eyes.

It was on the fourth floor of an old walk-up in the West Nineties near Amsterdam Avenue. I don't know what it had in the way of a kitchen or bedroom—or bedrooms—because the only room I saw was the one we were sitting in. It was medium-sized, and the couch and chairs and rugs had a homey look, the kind of homeyness that furniture gets by being used by a lot of different people for fifty or sixty years. The chair I was on had a wobbly leg, but that's no problem if you keep it in mind and make no sudden shifts. I was more concerned about the spidery little stand at my elbow on which my glass of milk was perched. I can always drink milk and had preferred it to Bubble-Pagne, registered trademark, a dime a bottle, which they were having. It was ten o'clock Wednesday evening.

The hostesses were the redhead with milky skin, Peggy Choate, and the one with big brown eyes and dimples, Nora Jaret, who shared the apartment. Carol Annis,

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with the fine profile and the corn-silk hair, had been there when Helen Iacono and I arrived, bringing Lucy Morgan and her throaty voice after detouring our taxi to pick her up at a street corner. They were a very attractive collection, though of course not as decorative as they had been in their ankle-length purple stolas. Girls always look better in uniforms or costumes. Take nurses or elevator girls or Miss Honeydew at a melon festival.

I was now calling her Helen, not that I felt like it, but in the detective business you have to be sociable, of course preserving your honor and virtue. In the taxi, before picking up Lucy Morgan, she told me she had been thinking it over and she doubted if it would be possible to find out which one of them had a good reason to kill Pyle, or thought she had, because Pyle had been so very careful when he had a girl come to his penthouse. The only way would be to get one of them to open up, and Helen doubted if she could get her to, since she would be practically confessing murder. So the best way would be for Helen and me, after spending an evening with them, to talk it over and decide which one was the most likely, and then she would tell Wolfe she had seen her going back to the kitchen and bringing another plate, and Wolfe would tell the police, and that would do it.

No, I didn't feel like calling her Helen. I would just as soon have been too far away from her to call her at all.

Helen's declared object in arranging the party—declared to them—was to find out from me what Nero Wolfe and the cops had done and were doing, so they would know where they stood. Helen was sure I would loosen up, she had told them, because she had been to see me and found me very nice and sympathetic. So the hostesses were making it sort of restive and intimate by serving Bubble-Pagne, though I preferred milk. I had a suspicion that at least one of them, Lucy Morgan, would have preferred whiskey or gin or rum or vodka, and maybe they all would, but that might have made me suspect that they were not just a bunch of wholesome, hard-working artists.

They didn't look festive. I wouldn't say they were haggard, but much of the bloom was off. And they hadn't bought Helen's plug for me that I was nice and sympathetic. They were absolutely skeptical, sizing me up with sidewise looks, especially Carol Annis, who sat cross-legged on the couch with her head cocked. It was she who asked me, after a few remarks had been made about how awful it had been and still was, how well I knew the chef and the other man in the kitchen. I told her she could forget Fritz. He was completely above suspicion, and anyway he

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had been at the range while the plates were taken. As for Zoltan, I said that though I had known him a long while we were not intimate, but that was irrelevant because, granting that he had known which guest each girl would serve, if he poisoned one of the portions and saw that a certain girl got it, why did she or some other girl come back for another plate?

"There's no proof that she did," Carol declared. "Nobody saw her."

"Nobody *noticed* her." I wasn't aggressive; I was supposed to be nice and sympathetic. "She wouldn't have been noticed leaving the dining room because the attention of the girls who were in there was on Felix and Marjorie Quinn, who had spilled a blini, and the men wouldn't notice her. The only place she would have been noticed was in the corridor through the pantry, and if she met another girl there she could have stopped and been patting her hair or something. Anyhow, one of you must have gone back for a second plate, because when Fern Faber went for hers there wasn't any."

"Why do you say one of us?" Nora demanded. "If you mean one of us here. There were twelve."

"I do mean one of you here, but I'm not saying it, I'm just quoting the police. They think it was one of you here because you were the last five."

"How do you know what they think?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. But I do."

"I know what I think," Carol asserted. She had uncrossed her legs and slid forward on the couch to get her toes on the floor. "I think it was Zoltan. I read in the *Gazette* that he's a chef at Rusterman's, and Nero Wolfe is the trustee and so he's the boss there, and I think Zoltan hated him for some reason and tried to poison him, but he gave the poisoned plate to the wrong girl. Nero Wolfe sat right next to Pyle."

There was no point in telling her that she was simply ignoring the fact that one of them had gone back for a second helping, so I just said, "Nobody can stop you thinking. But I doubt very much if the police would buy that."

"What would they buy?" Peggy asked.

My personal feelings about Peggy were mixed. For: she had recognized me and named me. Against: she had accused me of liking myself. "Anything that would fit," I told her. "As I said, they think it was one of you five that went back for more, and therefore they have to think that one of you gave the poison to Pyle, because what other possible reason could you have had for serving another portion? They wouldn't buy anything that didn't fit into that. That's what rules out everybody else, including Zoltan." I looked at Carol. "I'm sorry, Miss Annis, but that's how it is."

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"They're a bunch of dopes," Lucy Morgan stated. "They get an idea and then they haven't got room for another one." She was on the floor with her legs stretched out, her back against the couch. "I agree with Carol, there's no proof that any of us went back for another plate. That Zoltan said he didn't see anyone come back. Didn't he?"

"He did. He still does."

"Then he's a dope too. And he said no one took two plates. Didn't he?"

"Right. He still does."

"Then how do they know which one he's wrong about? We were all nervous, you know that. Maybe one of us took two plates instead of one, and when she got to the dining room there she was with an extra, and she got rid of it by giving it to some guest that didn't have any."

"Then why didn't she say so?" I asked.

"Because she was scared. The way Nero Wolfe came at us was enough to scare anybody. And now she won't say so because she has signed a statement and she's even more scared."

I shook my head. "I'm sorry, but if you analyze that you'll see that it won't do. It's very tricky. You can do it the way I did this afternoon. Take twenty-four little pieces of paper, on twelve of them write the names of the guests, and arrange them as they sat at the table. On the other twelve pieces write the names of the twelve girls. Then try to manipulate the twelve girl pieces so that one of them either took in two plates at once, and did not give either of them to Pyle, or went back for a second plate, and did not give either the first one or the second one to Pyle. It can't be done. For if either of those things happened there wouldn't have been one mix-up, there would have been two. Since there was only one mix-up, Pyle couldn't possibly have been served by a girl who neither brought in two plates at once nor went back for a second one. So the idea that a girl *innocently* brought in two plates is out."

"I don't believe it," Nora said flatly.

"It's not a question of believing." I was still sympathetic. "You might as well say you don't believe two plus two is four. I'll show you. May I have some paper? Any old kind."

She went to a table and brought some, and I took my pen and wrote the twenty-four names, spacing them, and tore the paper into twenty-four pieces. Then I knelt on a rug and arranged the twelve guest pieces in a rectangle as they had sat at table—not that that mattered, since they could have been in a straight line or a circle, but it was plainer that way. The girls gathered around.

"Okay," I said, "show me." I took *Quinn* and put it back of *Leacraft*. "There's no argument

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about that, Marjorie Quinn brought the first plate and gave it to Leacraft. Remember there was just one mix-up, started by Peggy when she saw Pyle had been served and gave hers to Nero Wolfe. Try having any girl bring in a second plate—or bring in two at once if you still think that might have happened—without either serving Pyle or starting a second mix-up."

My memory has had a long stiff training under the strains and pressures Wolfe has put on it, but I wouldn't undertake to report all the combinations they tried, huddled around me on the floor. They stuck to it for half an hour or more. The most persistent was Peggy Choate, the redhead. After the others had given up she stayed with it, frowning and biting her lip, propped first on one hand and then the other. Finally she said, "Nuts," stretched an arm to make a jumble of all the pieces of paper, guests and girls, got up, and returned to her chair.

"It's just a trick," said Carol Annis, perched on the couch again.

"I still don't believe it," Nora Jaret declared. "I do not believe that one of us deliberately poisoned a man—one of us sitting here." Her big brown eyes were at me. "Good lord, look at us! Point at her! Point her out! I dare you to!"

That, of course, was what I was there for—not exactly to point her out, but at least to get a hint. I had had a vague idea that one might come from watching them maneuver the pieces of paper, but it hadn't. Nor from anything any of them had said. I had been expecting Helen Iacono to introduce the subject of Vincent Pyle's *modus operandi* with girls, but apparently she had decided it was up to me. She hadn't spoken more than twenty words since we arrived.

"If I could point her out," I said, "I wouldn't be bothering the rest of you. Neither would the cops if *they* could point her out. Sooner or later, of course, they will, but it begins to look as if they'll have to get at it from the other end. Motive. They'll have to find out which one of you had a motive, and they will—sooner or later—and on that maybe I can help. I don't mean help them, I mean help you—not the one who killed him, the rest of you. That thought occurred to me after I learned that Helen Iacono had admitted that she had gone out with Pyle a few times last winter. What if she had said she hadn't? When the police found out she had lied, and they would have, she would have been in for it. It wouldn't have proved she had killed him, but the going would have been mighty rough. I understand that the rest of you have all denied that you ever had anything to do with Pyle. Is that right? Miss Annis?"

"Certainly." Her chin was up. "Of course I had met him. Everybody in show business has. Once when he came backstage at the

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Coronet, and once at a party somewhere, and one other time but I don't remember where."

"Miss Morgan?"

She was smiling at me, a crooked smile. "Do you call this helping us?" she demanded.

"It might lead to that after I know how you stand. After all, the cops have your statement."

She shrugged. "I've been around longer than Carol, so I had seen him to speak to more than she had. Once I danced with him at the Flamingo, two years ago. That was the closest I had ever been to him."

"Miss Choate?"

"I never had the honor. I only came to New York last fall. From Montana. He had been pointed out to me from a distance, but he never chased me."

"Miss Jaret?"

"He was Broadway," she said. "I'm TV."

"Don't the twain ever meet?"

"Oh, sure. All the time at Sardi's. That's the only place I ever saw the great Pyle, and I wasn't with him."

"So there you are," I said, "you're all committed. If one of you poisoned him, and though I hate to say it I don't see any way out of that, that one is lying. But if any of the others are lying, if you saw more of him than you admit, you had better get from under quick. If you don't want to tell the cops tell me, tell me now, and I'll pass it on and say I wormed it out of you. Believe me, you'll regret it if you don't."

"Archie Goodwin, a girl's best friend," Lucy said. "My bosom pal."

No one else said anything.

"Actually," I asserted, "I *am* your friend, all of you but one. I have a friendly feeling for all pretty girls, especially those who work, and I admire and respect you for being willing to make an honest fifty bucks by coming there yesterday to carry plates of grub to a bunch of finickers. I *am* your friend, Lucy, if you're not the murderer."

I leaned forward, forgetting the wobbly chair leg, but it didn't object. It was about time to put a crimp in Helen's personal project. "Another thing. It's quite possible that one of you *did* see her returning to the kitchen for another plate, and you haven't said so because you don't want to squeal on her. If so, spill it now. The longer this hangs on, the hotter it will get. When it gets so the pressure is too much for you and you decide you have got to tell it, it will be too late. Tomorrow may be too late. If you go to the cops with it tomorrow they probably won't believe you; they'll figure that you did it yourself and you're trying to squirm out. If you don't want to tell me here and now, in front of her, come with me down to Nero Wolfe's office and we'll talk it over."

They were exchanging glances, and they were not friendly glances.

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When I had arrived probably not one of them, excluding the murderer, had believed that a poisoner was present, but now they all did, or at least they thought she might be; and when that feeling takes hold it's goodbye to friendliness. It would have been convenient if I could have detected fear in one of the glances, but fear and suspicion and uneasiness are too much alike on faces to tell them apart.

"You *are* a help," Carol Annis said bitterly. "Now you've got us hating each other. Now everybody suspects everybody."

I had quit being nice and sympathetic. "It's about time," I told her. I glanced at my wrist. "It's not midnight yet. If I've made you all realize that this is no Broadway production, or TV either, and the longer the payoff is postponed the tougher it will be for everybody, I *have* helped." I stood up. "Let's go. I don't say Mr. Wolfe can do it by just snapping his fingers, but he might surprise you. He has often surprised me."

"All right," Nora said. She arose. "Come on. This is getting too damn painful. Come on."

I don't pretend that that was what I had been heading for. I admit that I had just been carried along by my tongue. If I arrived with the gang at midnight and Wolfe had gone to bed, he would almost certainly refuse to play. Even if he were still up, he might refuse to work, just to teach me a lesson, since I had not stuck to my instructions. Those thoughts were at me as Peggy Choate bounced up and Carol Annis started to leave the couch.

But they were wasted. That tussle with Wolfe never came off. A door at the end of the room which had been standing ajar suddenly swung open, and there in its frame was a two-legged figure with shoulders almost as broad as the doorway, and I was squinting at Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Manhattan Homicide West. He moved forward, croaking, "I'm surprised at you, Goodwin. These ladies ought to get some sleep."

(*continued on page 148*)

CRIMINALIMERICKS

STOUT FELLOW *by D. R. BENSEN*

Nero Wolfe is a notably fat man,
Yet you're bound to say, seeing him, "That man
Can solve any crime
In a rather short time,
Though his methods are not those of Batman."

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Once again we join the world's first detective, the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, and his American confidant and chronicler, and the Prefect of the Parisian police—and this time we have a new "Dupin" story to delight the detectival hearts of all those who have a special fondness for the "miracle problem," the "impossible crime." For in this ingenious tale of pure ratiocination, "Dupin" is faced with (to use a phrase he himself is partial to) "an excessively odd affair." To wit—Mr. Solon P. Twinberrow (a name to delight aficionados of Poe), Second Secretary of the United States Legation in Paris in the year 183-, walked out of the Legation's front door, was positively seen to cross the courtyard, was just as positively seen to go through the wicket-gate opening onto the Rue de Grenelle St. Germain—and, presto, Mr. Twinberrow vanished into thin air!

And only the great "Dupin" could prevent the dire consequences of a diplomatic scandal of the first magnitude . . .

THE FACTS IN THE CASE OF THE MISSING DIPLOMAT

another "hitherto unpublished" tale of C. Auguste Dupin

by MICHAEL HARRISON

"IT IS A DIPLOMATIC SCANDAL OF THE first magnitude," said G——, one day in the Autumn of 183-, as he sat by the fire in our little back library, or book-closet, *au troisième*, No. 33, Rue Dunôt, Faubourg St. Germain. "In the inflammatory atmosphere which exists at present, it is a scandal which might—and conceivably *will*—lead to something far more tragic than a mere exchange of acrimonious notes."

"It is unthinkable," said I, "that my adopted country and the country of my birth could contemplate war over so trivial a matter as the disappearance of a minor diplomat!"

"However," murmured my friend, the Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, from behind a perfectly opaque cloud of Latakia, "the *reasons* for the disappearance may not be so trivial."

"Well said, Dupin!" G—— ex-

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claimed, with his customary appearance of attempting to patronize my friend. "I can tell you that neither the United States Government nor the Government of His Most Christian Majesty is disposed to treat this affair as in the least trivial. To put you *au courant* with the favorite—and most hastily conceived—opinion, the North Americans maintain that Monsieur Solon P. Twinberrow, Second Secretary at the United States Legation in Paris, has been kidnaped or seduced from his duty by gold. In either case, the villain of the piece is France. The French opinion—I give it to you for what it is worth—is that Mr. Twinberrow has betrayed state secrets, and that his disappearance was entirely voluntary."

"Does the rumor—the second rumor, I mean—indicate the recipient of the state secrets betrayed by Mr. Twinberrow?"

"Yes. French opinion inclines to see the hand of Spain in all this."

"How so?" Dupin inquired, puffing furiously at his meerschaum. "On what facts is this opinion based?—if there are any facts."

"There are some facts, right enough," answered the Prefect of the Parisian police. "Sufficient, at any rate, to make the theory of Spain's culpability plausible. In the first place, Monsieur Twinberrow's country shares Number 71, Rue de Grenelle St. Germain with the *chargé d'affaires* of the Roman States."

"I did not appreciate the fact that the Legations of Pope Pius VIII and President Andrew Jackson shared the same building! Strange . . . and the Rue de Grenelle is only just around the corner! But pray continue. Spain is an exclusively Catholic country, and it is suggested that the Legation of the Roman States serves as a sort of clearing-house through which persons friendly to Spain may send and receive messages? Just so! And what else has rumor found to uphold its suspicion of Mr. Twinberrow?"

"He is friendly with the Papal *chargé d'affaires*. He often plays chess with him at the Café Procope. You raise your eyebrows? You have the look of asking, 'Why not?'"

"I shall even permit myself to ask it aloud. Well, why not? Is it a crime to play chess?"

"Monsieur Twinberrow has extensive properties in both Texas and California. It is said that he is sentimentally disposed toward Spain and her former colonies."

"Possibly. Yet 'Twinberrow' is a name with something so essentially Anglo-Saxon about it, that one may hardly suppose a man bearing it to imagine himself more Iberian than British—or North American, to be precise. What else has been found in Mr. Twinberrow's disfavor? An extravagant mistress?"

"Worse. An extravagant wife. One may often disengage oneself from a mistress; but a wife—"

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"Exactly. Does he gamble?"

"Yes. And, contrary to the general rule, he wins. He gambles to recoup something of the money that his wife spends; yet he wins. It is most unusual."

"Does he win honestly?"

"So far as we know, yes. Cards are something of a passion with the North Americans. With them, a man would be as ashamed of playing cards badly as one of us would be of a confessed inability to handle foils or pistols. No, Monsieur Twinberrow wins, not because he cheats, but because he plays with exceptional skill."

"If he wins often, then he must have made enemies?"

"We have taken that possibility into account," said G—— portentously. "It has been easy to trace the persons who have lost heavily to this gentleman. He is, by the bye, a member of most of the best clubs in Paris—*Cercle des Echecs, Cercle de l'Union, Athenée Royal,* and perhaps others. It is not hard to find how much one wins—and another loses—when both are members of well-known clubs, where at least one of the club-domestics is a secret agent of the police."

"His politics?"

"Republican, only so far as he is the trusted servant of a republican system. Otherwise, when His Majesty murmurs, *'Je suis charmé, Messieurs, de vous voir,'* as he acknowledges his guests at the Tuileries, be sure that he speaks to Monsieur Twinberrow among the assembly. Republican he may be; anti-monarchist, he does not appear to be."

"Have the public sheets—I particularize the Opposition newspapers, *La Patrie,* say, or *Le Courrier Français*—got wind of Mr. Twinberrow's disappearance?"

"I think not. Though, of course, we have the power to seize any newspaper containing news whose publication we have decided is premature or against the public interest."

"And you wish me to find Mr. Twinberrow?"

"Find him, or provide the reason for his disappearance. For preference, I should like the explanation to avoid any heightening of the present tension between my Government and that of the United States. Great Britain's present policy is favorable to North America—any difference between France and the United States would be immediately, and ruthlessly, exploited by King William's ministry."

"This is an exceedingly curious affair," said Dupin, as though he were talking aloud to himself, and not addressing us. "Here we have a diplomat, accredited to the Legation of what is not yet, but will almost certainly become, a Great Power. So far as we know, the diplomat enjoys a good reputation, suffers from no serious entanglements, and though it is said that his wife is extravagant, he has the means to balance that extravagance.

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"He does his diplomatic work well; he is in good standing with his own Government, though we must notice that, having no established Diplomatic Civil Service, the United States Government cannot offer its diplomats the same security of profession that other Governments offer their foreign representatives. Like all other Americans in a similar position, Mr. Twinberrow must guard himself against dismissal through a mere change of executive administration. This fact might mean that he had contracted some *undesirable friends or commitments*. We shall see.

"You tell me that all the Governments concerned—in fact, in supposition, in possibility, and in plain rumor—have willingly coöperated?"

"I could not have wished for more wholehearted coöperation."

"This may mean everything—or nothing. But it may let us accept a few facts as probable, if not exactly proven. For instance, Mr. Twinberrow left the Legation in the Rue de Grenelle, intending to walk the few paces separating him from the Ministry of the Interior, where he had business. Watched by a domestic from the front door of the Legation, Mr. Twinberrow walked across the courtyard, through the small wicket-gate—the large carriage-gates were closed—and turned left."

"Dupin," said G—— earnestly, "it is of vital import that we never lose sight of the fact that Monsieur Twinberrow was not only observed by the domestic to walk across the courtyard, he was seen clearly to pass through the small wicket-gate, and then as clearly seen to turn to the left."

"My dear fellow!" Dupin protested, not unamiably. "Have I not said as much?"

"I think you should emphasize it more," said G—— testily. "The whole mystery seems to depend upon the fact that Monsieur Twinberrow was seen to cross the yard, go *out, and turn left.*"

"Precisely! But let me continue. At this moment the domestic caught sight of a packet that Mr. Twinberrow should have taken with him. This sealed packet was lying on a table which stands just within the front door of the Legation. Mr. Twinberrow, perhaps in putting on his gloves, had obviously laid the packet down, and had then departed without remembering to pick it up.

"The domestic caught up the packet, ran swiftly down the steps and across the courtyard, and so through the open wicket-gate. He looked left—no Mr. Twinberrow. He looked right—no Mr. Twinberrow.

"The mysterious aspect of the disappearance is that, at this part of the Rue de Grenelle St. Germain, there is nothing but an almost continuous high wall, pierced only by the carriage-gates of the various houses

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on this street. The distance between the gates of Number 71, Rue de Grenelle St. Germain and the next pair of gates *on either side* is so distant that Mr. Twinberrow could have reached them only by running faster than ever did Atalanta. And a soberly-dressed diplomat, running, would have attracted considerable attention."

G—— coughed, in a manner entirely characteristic of his fatuous self-satisfaction.

"Hem, hem! Monsieur Twinberrow, as a young midshipman in the war with Great Britain, sustained a severe injury to his right knee. Though he walks without too much difficulty, *he cannot run even two yards*. Dupin, there simply was not time for Monsieur Twinberrow to have reached a gateway on either side of his Legation before the domestic ran out into the street and tried to catch up with him."

"The gates opposite?"

"There is a blank wall. Opposite, the gates are even more distant. We have tested the fact that Monsieur Twinberrow could not have reached the shelter of a gate in the Rue de Grenelle before the domestic himself came into the street."

"Nevertheless, you have inquired diligently of those in the neighboring houses?"

"Diligently. Openly—and secretly. We have asked the owners, we have examined the domestics. We have advertised for passers-by who might have seen something in the Rue de Grenelle on the day in question. Monsieur Twinberrow left the Legation of the United States to keep an appointment at the Ministry of the Interior. We know that he left the Legation. We know that he did not reach the Ministry. What happened to prevent his keeping his appointment, we cannot say. That, my dear Chevalier, is what we should like you to find out."

"You have placed all the facts before me?"

"All which are known to us. Is there anything more you would like to ask me?"

"You searched—or made inquiries—at all the neighboring houses, even those Mr. Twinberrow could not possibly have reached in the extremely short time that he was out of sight of the domestic? Yes, indeed. But did you also search *within* the carriage-gates? Unlikely as it would seem, Mr. Twinberrow may somehow have doubled back, and secreted himself in some back part of the courtyard—even within one of the coaches or carriages which stood there?"

"We searched *everywhere*," said G—— complacently. "I can assure you positively that Monsieur Twinberrow was not in the courtyard, nor in any of the coaches. Is there still something more you would like to ask me?"

"Only one thing. What was in the packet which was left on the table, and that the domestic was unable to hand back to Mr. Twinberrow?"

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"Great heavens, Dupin! As though I could know! It would be more than my position as the Prefect of police is worth to open such a packet."

Dupin puffed away at his meerschaum for several seconds before he commented, in a tone of some contempt.

"A sealed packet would not defy the skill of your expert letter-openers, nor would the fact that it was a diplomatically-privileged document prevent you from reading it. The fact is, my dear G——, you quite overlooked the packet in the excitement of looking for Mr. Twinberrow. Now, isn't that so?"

G—— grimaced, but attempted to make light of the matter.

"Oh, well, Dupin, one may trust you to find some trifling irrelevancy. What has the packet to do with Monsieur Twinberrow's vanishing so mysteriously?"

"Why, as to that, I cannot say," responded Dupin coolly. "But I recommend that your agents find out, first, what happened to the packet, when the domestic found that he would be unable to return it to Mr. Twinberrow, and, second, what was in the packet—the nature of the documents or whatever it was that the packet contained. I should also like you to discover whether or not the packet had to do with Mr. Twinberrow's call on the Ministry. By the way, G——, does not this disappearance recall one which made great noise some years ago?"

"Indeed it does!" said G——. "It was in the time of the late Emperor. An English diplomat—Monsieur Be—Ba—Bo—"

"Bathurst?"

"Precisely what I was about to call him. It was on the tip of my tongue. Monsieur Bathurst, special envoy from his Britannic Majesty to the Court of the Austrian Emperor. He stopped at an inn, and stood in the courtyard while they watered his horses. He moved around the horses, and was never seen again. All the police forces of Europe hunted this Bathurst, but—"

"Exactly! Well, learn what was in the packet. And in the meanwhile I shall try to solve the problem of Mr. Twinberrow's disappearance."

To those accustomed to meeting the polished and reserved gentlemen that the older nations send abroad as their official representatives, a first entry into the Legation of the United States may come as something of a shock.

There is an air of informality that many find refreshing, and some find upsetting, but all find distinctly unusual—not to say unique. Here, one feels, is something of the true republican spirit; but not that of the first French Republic—rather, say, that of Periclean Athens.

We were greeted civilly enough, but with an absence of display. The domestics were in plain livery, without powder or shoulder-knots; and we were not kept waiting in an an-

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te-room, the object of cynical inspection by footmen and *suisses*. Indeed, within a minute or so of our handing our cards to the porter, we were ushered into the Minister's private drawing-room.

"Gentlemen," said the Minister, when the customary salutations had been exchanged, "I shall tell you all that I know, for I am as anxious as His Majesty's Government to investigate this matter, discover the truth, and seek, if possible, to avert the graver results which threaten so ominously. But, all the same, I must warn you that feelings may run very high among our people if Mr. Twinberrow is not found. Now, my dear Chevalier, ask me what you will."

"First, Excellency, I should like to see and speak to your domestic—the one who ran after Mr. Twinberrow."

"Your name is Louis Girardon," said Dupin, when the man stood before him. "Aged twenty-four, a native of Arcachon. You have done your military service, and my friend, Monsieur G——, the Prefect of the Parisian police, gives you a good character. His Excellency the Minister has kindly given me permission to ask you some questions."

"Yes, Girardon, answer all questions," said the Minister.

"Very good, Messieurs. What does Monsieur require to know?"

"You were in the front hall when Mr. Twinberrow left to go to the Ministry of the Interior. It was you, I believe, who noticed that he had forgotten a small packet—"

"I saw it lying on the side-table, Monsieur. I then recalled that Mr. Twinberrow had been carrying it in his hand when he came into the hall from his office, and that he had put it down so that he could the more easily get into his *paletôt*."

"You held the *paletôt* so that Mr. Twinberrow could put it on?"

"Yes, Monsieur, as soon as Mr. Twinberrow came into the hall, I opened the door of the closet and took out his *paletôt*. He laid down the packet and I helped him on with his overcoat. He said something like, 'Oh, I am in a hurry! I must not be late!'—and went out very quickly through the front door that I held open.

"Then I closed the door and came back into the hall. I noticed the packet lying on the table, and I opened the door again and ran out into the courtyard and through the small gate into the Rue de Grenelle, to try to catch Mr. Twinberrow before he entered the Ministry of the Interior."

"Which is only a few steps away from us," the Minister added.

Dupin frowned. "You said just now that you ran out 'to *try* to catch Mr. Twinberrow.' Why did you say *try* to catch him? Were you unsure of your ability to catch him? After all, you had only to cross the courtyard. You have done your military service, you are an active young man. Can you not run?"

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"Oh, yes, Monsieur. But the courtyard was so full of horses that—"

"Horses! Is this the Bathurst affair all over again?"

"You mean the Bathurst affair of some quarter-century ago?" asked the Minister. "I recall that. Yes, this case does remind me of it. You think there's some connection, Chevalier?"

"*That's what we must discover.* Girardon, these horses? Whose horses?"

"We had two callers at that moment, Monsieur. Mr. Cyrus Rogers, the American banker, who came in a coach-and-six, and Baron von Glueck, the military attaché of Hesse-Darmstadt, who came in a tilbury. Then—not for *us,* Messieurs, but for the Roman States—came two other carriages: one a light berline, of English make, I should say; the other, a heavy, old-fashioned carriage, all covered with worn black leather and gilt studs—evidently from Italy. I know nothing of the persons whom they brought. But this made some fourteen horses in the courtyard."

"Did they delay you?" Dupin asked.

"Not really, Monsieur. I slipped between them and was out into the Rue de Grenelle within a matter of seconds. But I could not see Mr. Twinberrow."

"So you returned to the Legation?"

"No, Monsieur. I did not understand how Mr. Twinberrow could have vanished so quickly from sight—at least, not without his having run; and I knew that he could not do that. All the same, I went quickly to the nearest gateway in the direction in which he had been intending to go, and saw at once that he was not in the courtyard. Still, I inquired of an ostler, and it was as he said: Mr. Twinberrow had not *come through that pair of gates.*

"It seemed unlikely that he would have gone the other way; still, I doubled back and tried the next pair of gates in *that* direction. Again I looked; again I inquired of a domestic within the courtyard. The same result, Messieurs—Mr. Twinberrow had vanished, as if from the face of the earth."

The Minister asked: "Have you anything more to inquire of Girardon?"

"Yes. Tell me, Girardon, what did you do with the packet, once you saw that you would not be able to give it to Mr. Twinberrow?"

"The packet, Monsieur? I placed it on the table in Mr. Twinberrow's office."

"Go and fetch it, please."

"I wonder what's in it," said the Minister, when the door had closed behind the domestic.

"Paper," said Dupin.

"Probably. But I meant, what is on the paper?"

"Nothing," said Dupin quietly.

Girardon returned with the packet. It had been sealed with the Legation stamp, and was addressed, in

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what the Minister recognized as the missing Mr. Twinberrow's hand, to His Excellency the Minister of the Interior.

"Tell Girardon he may go," said Dupin; and, at a nod from the Minister, the man left us. Dupin handed the packet to the American Minister, who broke the seals and opened it. The packet contained sheets of blank paper.

"What on earth! But who would do such a foolish thing?"

"Someone," said Dupin drily, "who wished Girardon to walk across the courtyard. Excellency, we have much to do before we can tell you what has happened to your missing Second Secretary."

"Between ourselves, Dupin," I asked, as we crossed the cobble-stoned expanse which separated the front door of the Legation from the closed carriage-gates, "who would wish that Girardon should walk across the courtyard?"

"The person," Dupin replied gravely, "who wished Girardon later to testify that Mr. Twinberrow had crossed the courtyard, passed through the open wicket-gate that is cut in the left-hand leaf of the larger carriage-gates, and then appeared to turn in the direction of the Ministry of the Interior."

"In other words," I said drily, "to recount what happened."

"To recount what the domestic *believed* had happened. It is by no means the same thing."

"Not in this case, Dupin? Oh, but he actually saw Mr. Twinberrow cross the courtyard and pass through the wicket-gate—"

"Yes, he saw that. And he saw Mr. Twinberrow, after he had passed through the wicket-gate, turn toward the left. But that is *all* he saw. However, let me, for the present, call your attention to the somewhat *odd* nature—the excessively odd nature, I might say—of the wicket-gate cut into the carriage-gates."

"Dupin," I said testily, "when you repeat yourself, I realize that there is something to which you wish to call my attention."

"You are correct. I wish to call your attention to the wicket-gate. You see nothing odd about its construction? No? Well, no matter; let us have a word with the concierge, as I perceive that he is in his little lodge and appears to be mightily interested in us."

Dupin walked up to the lodge, which stood, as is usual, just within the gates, and tapped on the window-pane. The window shot up with what I judged to be abnormal alacrity. "Messieurs?" the concierge asked.

"We are making some inquiries on behalf of Monsieur G——, of whom I expect you have heard." Dupin knew well that he could rely on the traditional Parisian's respect for the police; and as all the concierges of the French capital hold their positions only by acting as un-

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paid police informers, Dupin feared no lack of coöperation here.

"At your service, Messieurs. You wish to ask some questions?"

"The wicket-gate which has been cut in the main gates is of unusual design, I perceive."

"How so, Monsieur?"

"Well, usually such wicket-gates do not extend all the way to the ground, but have a sill some twenty centimetres high, over which one has to step in passing through. Ah, I see that you comprehend my meaning!"

"Yes, of course, Monsieur. You wish to call my attention to the fact that this wicket-gate reaches to the ground, just like any ordinary door. Well, now, we haven't had it like that so very long. A few days, only, come to that. You'll see that the wicket-gate itself has been strengthened with iron bars, to allow the former sill to be cut away."

"I take it that this was done at Mr. Twinberrow's request, because his bad knee made it somewhat difficult to raise his leg over the sill?"

"That is correct, sir," said the concierge. "It was he who arranged for the work to be done—though most other people appreciate the extra space that this new type of wicket-gate affords."

"Just so. The main gates are customarily kept locked—opened, of course, only to permit a carriage to enter or leave? Just so. And during the hours of daylight the wicket-gate itself is kept open—to save visitors the necessity of ringing for you and waiting for you to open it?"

"Yes, Monsieur. From my window I can see all who come and go."

A *pourboire* changed hands, and we walked to the open wicket, passing through it into the Rue Grenelle. Dupin laid a hand on my arm.

"Pause a moment! We have not yet done with our examination of Number 71, Rue de Grenelle St. Germain. There is another curious—and equally significant—difference between this gate and others of its type. Whereas most of these gates—indeed, all that I have ever seen—open *inwards,* as do the shutters on windows in England, this one opens *outwards*—as do the shutters on windows in France."

"Is that of importance, Dupin?"

"It is of the *first* importance! Notice that the hinges are too near the edge of the main gate for the wicket-gate to lie flat back. Therefore it is held open with a simple hook-and-eyelet fastened to the stone pillar from which the gate itself hangs. Ah! I see! We shall return this afternoon to tell His Excellency the truth about the disappearance of Mr. Solon P. Twinberrow."

"But, Dupin, how can you be so positive that you will know the solution by this afternoon?"

Dupin smiled. "Because I know the answer already, but His Excellency will be the more ready to accept it if he believes that I have given it many hours of thought. Come! A short walk to the Rue du Four,

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and after that but a few steps along the Rue Dauphine, and we shall be on the Quai Conti, where, at either the Café Conti or the Café Favier, we may have an excellent luncheon. The day is fine, and I know now what happened to Mr. Twinberrow."

"First of all," said Dupin, when we were once again seated in the drawing-room of the American Minister, "let us have Girardon back. Our missing diplomat had an accomplice—of that we may be sure."

"Great heavens! Not Girardon, surely!"

"No, Girardon is not the accomplice. So far," added Dupin drily, "he has not been a particularly trustworthy witness. However, be good enough to ring for him.

"Girardon," said Dupin, when the man had answered the bell, "I have some further questions. But one is of the utmost consequence. It was not *you,* was it, who noticed that Mr. Twinberrow had left the packet on the table? You acted with commendable promptitude, as soon as your attention had been called to the fact that the packet had been left behind. *But who first called your attention to the packet, Girardon?"*

"Well, Monsieur," said the man nervously, "I assure you that I was not trying to take credit which did not belong to me. It is simply that I did not consider the matter sufficiently important to mention that another domestic had said, 'Hello! the gentleman who has just left appears to have forgotten something!' I simply looked, saw that it was so, and hurried after Mr. Twinberrow as fast as I could. I have told you all this, Monsieur."

"In asking you to repeat it, we have established, for the first time, the presence of another domestic, whom you failed to mention before. Now, Girardon, who was this other domestic? Let us have him in here and ask *him* some questions. Do you know who he is?"

"No, Monsieur. I had never seen him before. He was wearing a different livery from my own—a blue livery, turned back with red, and with a large shoulder-knot. I took no particular notice, for we are always having the domestics of other Embassies and Legations in our hall and courtyard. But I think that the blue-and-red must have been the livery of Baron von Glueck's servants, as he was visiting us that day."

"Thank you. He may go now, Excellency."

When Girardon had left, Dupin turned to the Minister. "You must know Mr. Twinberrow much better than I, Excellency. So you should have remembered that he was—is, I should say—an excellent card-player. He excels, I believe, at the game called 'poker'—a game which depends largely upon the quality that we shall call 'bluff.'

"Excellency, I did not conceive it

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to be part of my duty to discover *why* Mr. Twinberrow left—that is perhaps your concern, with which you must deal; though I suggest that the burden of marital infelicity is one that Mr. Twinberrow may, at last, have found insupportable. Ah, I see by Your Excellency's expression—well, no matter! Let it suffice that I conceived it to be my duty to show that Mr. Twinberrow left of his own accord and in a manner—and for a reason—which need not impair good relations between your country, Excellency, and others."

"But where on earth did he hide himself in the Rue de Grenelle?"

"Come, Excellency, and I shall show you."

Our little procession made its way through the hall, across the courtyard, and through the wicket-gate. In the street Dupin unlatched the wicket-gate and swung it so that this smaller door within the larger gate was now shut.

"You have now seen, Excellency, all the clews. I suggest that we return to your drawing-room, and I shall tell you exactly what happened."

"It hardly matters at which point we begin," said Dupin, "but let us choose to begin with the alterations made in the wicket-gate.

"For what to him were sound personal reasons, Mr. Twinberrow decided to abandon his present personality and adopt another—that of a man who 'disappeared' in mysterious and seemingly impossible circumstances. I suggest that he has taken service with a Foreign Power, as a *franc-tireur*—perhaps even with France's Foreign Legion, perhaps with Spain's, perhaps with Great Britain's German Legion. He has *not* gone off to sell his country's secrets.

"You ask why? Because a spy—a traitor—seeks to keep the light *away* from himself; he does not, as Mr. Twinberrow has done, disappear in circumstances most conducive to getting himself widely discussed."

"But why did he go off in these highly unusual circumstances?"

"Simply explained, Excellency. He knew that a search of the neighboring houses and of the carriages within the courtyard would yield nothing. If his disappearance were never explained, it would, nevertheless, not point the finger of suspicion at anyone in particular."

"But it has already done so!"

"Excellency! Only a few days have elapsed, and I am here with the explanation. I think that Mr. Twinberrow foresaw that an explanation was not impossible—was, in fact, highly probable. All he wished was to have the time and opportunity in which to make good his escape. He was not concerned to leave his escape a perpetual mystery, like that of Mr. Bathurst's disappearance."

"And how *did* our Second Secretary escape, Chevalier?"

"Let us return to the wicket-gate. Feigning that he found it trouble-

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some, because of his injured knee, to raise his leg over the existing sill, he had the door extended downward, so that its lower edge touched the street. He also—though the concierge took no particular notice of this—ordered the workmen to rehang the door, so that it opened *outwards*.

"When I showed you the wicket-gate just now, Excellency, you must have noticed that the hinges of the re-hung wicket-gate were too near the edge of the main gate for the wicket-gate to lie back flat when open? You must have noticed, too, that, when kept open, the wicket-gate was held with a simple hook-and-eyelet fastened to the stone pillar from which the leaf of the gate itself hangs? So!

"Now, because the wicket-gate *cannot be folded back flat,* that means there is *a triangular space behind the opened wicket-gate*. On the day of Mr. Twinberrow's disappearance, once the wicket-gate was opened and latched on the street, there was a space big enough to conceal a standing man. Because the door had been lengthened downward, the man's feet would be invisible. As a hiding-place it had undeniable advantages. It offered perfect concealment, and it was easily entered and left. It served the purposes of Mr. Twinberrow admirably.

"Let me describe to you what happened on the day when Mr. Twinberrow seemed to disappear from mortal ken. First, he needed an accomplice, who, I am certain, could be found—were one indiscreet enough to seek him—in the service of the military attaché of Hesse-Darmstadt."

"A domestic in livery?"

"In livery, yes. A domestic? I think not. Hesse-Darmstadt, if you remember, does a thriving business in exporting trained soldiers—mercenaries—to more warlike neighbors. And, too, the ruler of Hesse-Darmstadt pays foreign volunteers more generously than does the ruler of France.

"Mr. Twinberrow arranged his disappearance for the day on which Baron von Glueck was due to call. I think that the presence of the other vehicles was purely natural and normal, and not connected with the plot.

"Mr. Twinberrow had taken care to provide himself with an appointment at the Ministry of the Interior —though what his business was there, I dare venture, Excellency, you do not know, nor does any one else, since the business was entirely imaginary. Girardon, having seen the Second Secretary off, begins to close the front door when a domestic—whom he had never seen before—taps him on the arm, and says: 'Hasn't the gentleman forgotten something?'—and indicates the packet on the table. Girardon, without much thought, picks up the packet and rushes out to intercept Mr. Twinberrow.

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"But Mr. Twinberrow has slipped within the triangular space behind the wicket-gate, and thus Girardon does not see him throughout the length and breadth of the Rue de Grenelle. Through the crack at the hinge, Mr. Twinberrow sees Girardon go into the courtyard of the next house, and your Second Secretary takes this opportunity to slip out of his temporary hiding-place."

"And where does he go then?"

"Onto the box of Baron von Glueck's tilbury. You may have observed that a nail had been driven into the wicket-gate. On this was hanging a coachman's heavy coat, in the von Glueck livery—big enough to cover even the *paletôt* that Mr. Twinberrow wore. There was also a coachman's hat. Mr. Twinberrow changed his own for this—his own he left behind the door, to be collected later, when the hue and cry had died down."

"But there must have been a coachman already, to drive the Baron to this Legation."

"Assuredly. Instructed by Mr. Twinberrow, he had come into the house by a back way. It was he who called Girardon's attention to the apparently forgotten packet."

"But suppose that Girardon had seen the packet immediately and handed it to Mr. Twinberrow?"

"Excellency, there was no forgotten packet to hand to him. The false German coachman brought the packet with him and it was he who laid it on the table for Girardon to find. No matter what Girardon may say *now*, he does not remember that Mr. Twinberrow walked into the hall bearing a sealed packet; he has been persuaded, by one of the simplest tricks in the stage-conjuror's *repertoire*, that he had seen what he had not, in fact, seen. Girardon, Excellency, is an innocent dupe."

"But suppose someone had noticed that there were *two* coachmen in the same livery?"

Dupin laughed. "I reminded you, did I not, that Mr. Twinberrow played poker—a game in which the psychological exploitation of one's opponent is carried to a fine art, if not perhaps to an exact science. Your Excellency, *there were not two coachmen in the von Glueck livery—there was only one!*

"You look astonished. Let me explain.

"Having called Girardon's attention to the 'planted' letter, and seen him off the premises, the accomplice, who had driven the Baron into the courtyard, and is still, of course, wearing the Baron's livery, opens the door of the hall-closet, takes out the fashionable hat which he had carefully placed within, slips off his livery coat, and puts it at the back of the closet; beneath the coachman's heavy garment he is wearing his own doubtless fashionable coat.

"It is probable that there was a cane within the closet; almost certainly, there would have been gloves. With the latest bolivar from

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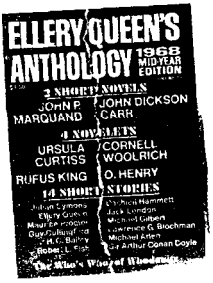
Servas on his head, a coat from Blanc, and boots, let us assume, from Lecerre, a walking-cane from Cazal, and a riband of some order in the buttonhole—with all these, who would question or look twice at such a man emerging from the front entrance?

"No one did. He walked across the courtyard and into the Rue de Grenelle. There was no one missing within the gates—and no extra person to whom attention might be called. The Baron—ignorant of the fact that he is aiding a diplomatic disappearance—entered his vehicle; the 'coachman' whipped up, and away went the Baron in his tilbury—with Mr. Twinberrow on the box. I take it that there will now be no increase in the bitterness and danger that this mysterious business has caused?"

"You may so take it, Chevalier. Both France and the United States have much for which to thank you!"



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—Anthony Boucher
The New York Times Book Review,
October 30, 1966

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STORY WITHOUT AN ENDING

by JUAN PAGE

They met when the Tigers were playing the Angels in Anaheim, and their torrid romance was fodder for the gossip columnists and the sports writers alike. He was a wild young Detroit left-hander, and she was a Hollywood starlet whose bust was reputed to precede her by twenty minutes. Their affair gave them celebrity beyond their talents, so she was given minor parts and major billing, and he survived in the majors after a two-and-one-third inning, no-hit effort in which he struck out four, walked seven, hit two batters, balked twice, wild-pitched once, and gave up five runs. His earned run average approached her dimensions.

As long as their affair continued, their careers seemed assured; but when it cooled off, as such things do, problems arose. She, as an All-American sex symbol, could not have it appear that *he* had dropped *her,* and he, as the idol of the Detroit Ladies' Day crowds, was not about to let it appear that *she* had dropped *him*. They grew to loathe each other. The situation was intolerable and could not continue.

They both arrived at the same solution at the same time. Each set up an unbreakable alibi, and they met at a deserted beach cottage near Malibu. They entered together and closed the door, he with his strong hands which could rub the shine off a baseball, and she with a small but lethal .32 pistol tucked into her famous cleavage.

Five minutes later, the door of the cottage opened . . .

CHALLENGE TO THE READER

How would you end the story? For the "author's" version see page 36.

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STILL MORE "O" BITS

by RICHARD M. GORDON

IX. "Skip the movies, John," they said;
"Forget about that broad in red."
But Dillinger was bold and wicked,
And the Feds shot him down as he bought his ticket.

X. General George A. Custer,
A bag of brag and bluster,
Proudly stood—till they knocked him flat,
While Sitting Bull as proudly—sat.

XI. Macbeth, Macbeth! Avoid Macduff!
If thou wouldst live, beware him!
From birth he was so fell and rough,
His mother, even, could not bear him.

XII. Caught by his hair in a wild oak tree,
Absalom met mortality;
There ought to be a message there,
My hippie friend, about *your* hair.*
*And I don't give a tinker's dam, son,
About the tragedy of Samson!

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Are you in the mood for an adventure? Are you afraid, perhaps, of ghosts? Well, pretend you have rented an Eighteenth Century country home in England—complete with ghost . . .

COMPLETE WITH GHOST

by AUGUST DERLETH

"HERE'S SOMETHING DIFFERENT," said Ellis Travers over the breakfast table at Claridge's. "It might be just what we want, Marjorie." He folded the paper and handed it to her.

His wife read the advertisement with mounting interest.

"For American—Why not take a house in the country by the week or month this summer? We offer charming houses at moderate prices. With or without ghost. Chichester's, Piccadilly."

"How novel!" she cried, her plain little face glowing.

"We shall want one with ghost, of course."

"Certainly."

"Price no object?"

"I've never been niggardly, have I?"

Travers ignored the question. "Shall we take it for a month?" he asked.

"With an option to extend, if we like it. We'll want it long enough for two or three parties. Try for the Cotswolds this year."

"I'll see them this morning," he promised.

Travers took his time. Since almost no one in London appeared for business before ten o'clock, there was nothing to be gained by haste. Nevertheless, promptly at ten o'clock he presented himself at Chichester's, and when he had got past a difficult young clerk and found himself face to face with Mr. Horace Chichester, he explained his need.

"Yes, we have something in the Cotswolds, sir," said Chichester. "A big house?"

"Please. With ghost."

"Ah," said Chichester softly, "that offers something more of a problem. Where would you prefer your ghost to be?"

"I don't follow you."

"We have ghosts in bedrooms, stairwells, and halls. Variety, you know."

"The hall, of course," said Travers instantly. "Can we count on manifestations?"

"From time to time. We guarantee it."

Copyright 1962 by August Derleth; originally titled "House—with Ghost."

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"Family ghost, I suppose?"

"All our ghosts are family ghosts, sir," said Chichester severely. "Now then, we have a fine old house just outside Cheltenham—a very fashionable city with many Eighteenth Century homes and terraces. There are suits of armor downstairs and in the upper hall. The ghosts, lights, and mutterings can be seen and heard from time to time at the head of the stairs and along the upper hall."

"That sounds just right," said Travers.

"Fine country, fine city," said Chichester. "The composer, Gustav Holst, was born there. Of course, he's been dead since 1934."

"I know," said Travers dryly, also knowing that Chichester thought him crude and uneducated. He did not particularly mind.

In half an hour the papers were signed, the key to the house was in Travers' pocket, and he left the office, aware that Chichester would probably be shaking his head and saying, "These crazy Americans!"

Crazy. Ha! A ghost in the hallway would be perfect. It takes an Englishman to believe in haunted houses, he thought, grinning.

He paused and looked at himself in a store front. The glass gave back the image of a tall athletic man in his early thirties with blond hair and sharp blue eyes that barely concealed the coldness and cynicism behind them. Marjorie thought his eyes showed gentleness and love. But it was her money that had bought his services and for six years he had performed with the conditioned responses of one of Pavlov's dogs. Now he wanted to get away, but if he left Marjorie he also left her money.

He was sorely tempted to drop in at the Ritz, which was not far away, but he couldn't take the chance. Not now. Instead, he found a telephone, called the hotel, and getting it, gave Sherry's room number.

"Baby," he said when he heard her voice.

"Any news?"

"We've taken a house in the country. Complete with ghost."

"So? Where?"

He told her.

"I'm tired of just sitting here," she pouted.

"I've been tired for six years," he said. "You've been waiting only one."

"I don't intend to pine my youth away. I don't pine very well."

"Just a little longer, sweet."

"How long?"

"Soon."

"And what's with this bit about the ghost?"

"The ghost will come in handy."

"You been drinking?"

"No, not at this hour. You'll see."

"If there's no definite understanding between us in two weeks, I'm going back to New York."

"Trust me."

"Two weeks, no more."

"I love you, Sherry."

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"I love better close up."

Travers hung up. Sometimes Sherry disturbed him a little. Sometimes he thought it might be best to find greener pastures. The only thing that kept him going was the hope of freedom—and Marjorie's considerable estate. But then the contrast between Sherry's joyous curves and Marjorie's flatness thinned his doubts.

He hastened back to Claridge's.

Marjorie's eyes asked her question.

"We've got it—a fine place in the country outside Cheltenham on the west base of the Cotswolds," he said.

"Large?"

"Yes—ghosts seem to need room to move around, though ours is in the upper hall and on the stairs."

"How many guest rooms?"

"Six."

"Splendid. We'll plan a party for the second week-end after we move in."

"When do we leave?"

"Anxious?"

"I'd like to get settled before we start partying."

"In two days," she promised.

"Suits me," said Travers. "Suits me just fine."

The house near Cheltenham was ideal in every respect. It was Georgian, with very decent guest accommodations, and ample room on the ground floor for dinner parties. Marjorie gushed.

When Travers saw the suits of armor in the upper hallway, he felt like gushing too. There were no less than six of them. Several held battleaxes in their right hand. The arms were wired in such a way that each ax appeared ready to drop on someone's skull.

Travers examined the wires; they were old and rusty and it seemed impossible that they could hold both the heavy metal arm and the ax in position. The wires looked as though the slightest disturbance would snap them. Travers touched one of the arms gingerly. It moved a little under the gentle pressure of his finger.

He stepped back quickly and pulled the ax from the metal fingers around it; the metal arm trembled as though it would drop. But the rusted wires held. Travers smiled and examined the heavy ax. The edge was very sharp and the piece had a good feel to it. Balanced perfectly.

He raised it over his head, brought it down, and could almost hear the air parting. For a long moment he stood lost in thought, then carefully and slowly he put the ax back between the armored fingers.

He went looking for Marjorie, found her downstairs, and followed her as she made a grand tour of the house. After they finished he asked, "Like it?"

"Adore it," she said.

It was the kind of vapid thing she always said. Adore!

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Travers suppressed a wild desire to hasten his plan.

"We'll need a staff, of course," Marjorie said. "Funny they didn't think of that at the agent's."

"I'll take care of it in Cheltenham," he promised. "For the moment, though, it's good to be alone here."

"It is, isn't it!"

"We could run into Cheltenham for meals for a few days, I expect."

"We'll need the staff for the weekend of the party."

"Invitations ready?"

"I'll get them out tomorrow."

"If we go into town, I suppose we could round up a cook, at least," he suggested. "That's your department."

They moved in, found a cook in Cheltenham, and took time about the rest of the staff. Quarters in the rear of the house would accommodate three servants, and there was a gardener's cottage on the grounds; but the house having been untenanted for some time, it had no garden.

And while Travers waited for the right moment, Marjorie continued to gush. Oh, yes, she just *adored* the house. And yes, she thought she had heard the ghost along the upper hall the other night. Travers hadn't heard anything, but he agreed with his wife that everything was just *adorable.*

His right moment came with a crash of thunder, with the wind rattling the windowpanes and a rainstorm howling in gusts outside the house. Holding a tray of liquor and glasses, Travers stood in the upper hallway near the suits of armor and saw them tremble when the thunder broke like an artillery barrage over the house, saw them shudder, and although the only light came from the lower hall, he imagined he could see the sharp ax edges gleaming. Things have a way of working out, he told himself.

He walked along the upper hallway and came to Marjorie's open bedroom door.

She was lying on the bed, her face pasty white. "Ellis," she said weakly, "Ellis, I think I saw our ghost."

"Now, dear," he said soothingly.

"I was in the hallway while you were getting the drinks. I was waiting for you to come upstairs and suddenly there was a flash of light. It was so bright I couldn't see for a moment, but when I did, the hallway was deserted."

"It was only lightning," said Travers and handed her a drink.

She was chewing on her knuckles, the pupils of her eyes large, and she said, "It happened again just before I got back to the room. There was another flash of bright light and I heard someone moving behind me, Ellis. I heard someone!"

"Marjorie, it was lightning. There's a storm outside, remember? You just saw a bolt of lightning, that's all. Perhaps it struck something nearby."

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"It was so bright," she said in the manner of a little child. But she had stopped chewing her knuckles and was now sipping her drink. "It was bright and I *did* hear someone moving behind me," she insisted.

"Yes, dear."

"I could have died right there, Ellis—I could have died!"

"Yes, dear."

"And no one would have cared," she said, her eyes growing moist. "I sometimes think you'd like that, Ellis."

"Have I ever given you reason to think that?" he said softly.

She only looked at him and then took a long swallow.

"Have I?" he pressed, knowing how careful he'd been.

She shook her head.

He bent over and kissed her. "Sorry you married me?"

She shook her head again.

He was about to pour another drink when he heard a sound that could only have been a moan.

Marjorie paled again. "Our ghost," she whispered.

"Don't be absurd," he said.

It sounded again. It was unmistakably a moan.

"The wind somewhere," he said. "Listen to it blow outside."

"Our ghost," she repeated.

"Loose shutters or a corner of the roof—something like that," he said.

"I'm afraid," she said. "I'm afraid."

Travers walked over and stood by the bed. "Now, Marjorie, you've got to get over this. It's ridiculous. We're going out in the hall and I'm going to show you there's no ghost."

"No!"

"Marjorie," he said sternly, "you're going out there."

"Please, I'm frightened."

He jerked her up from the bed. Her body sagged against him and her face, that plain face, was knotted with fear. "Please," she said. "*Please.*"

He almost carried her to the door. Once they were in the dark hall he forced her to walk ahead of him. She was whimpering. He urged her forward. "Ellis," she began.

"This is for your own good, my dear."

He dug his fingers into her shoulders and pushed her along. The noise of the storm was deafening—rain and wind were breaking against the window and sharp cracks were thundering overhead. Bright flashes of lightning illuminated the hall and Marjorie's eyes were opened wide—opened wide with terror.

He stopped her in front of one of the suits of armor. She was trembling. He could smell the fear in her.

As Marjorie gazed blindly into the darkness, he kept one hand on her shoulder and with the other reached up and pulled the ax from the metal fingers. The armor swayed. Travers lifted the ax over his head.

Suddenly, off to the side, thunder

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rolled and there was a bright flash. Marjorie screamed, "The ghost! That's the ghost!"

The hallway was lit again and again.

Travers grabbed Marjorie's arm and yanked her around. She had time to look up, see the ax falling, and her mouth started to form the o of a scream. Then her head was split open.

She dropped and lay silent.

Travers reached up and broke the wires that held up the right arm of the suit of armor. They snapped easily and the arm swung down heavily. Travers wiped his prints from the armor and then from the ax before he placed the ax next to the body. He didn't look at Marjorie's face but he did feel for her pulse. There was none.

He stood up and took a deep breath. He was free! Poor Marjorie. She was in the hallway. Terrified of the storm. It was dark and she must have bumped into a suit of armor. Or perhaps the thunder vibrations caused the ax to fall. Dreadful. Simply dreadful.

He must continue to think coolly.

First, the doctor. Then he must rouse the cook.

He walked back toward Marjorie's room and the telephone. He dialed Cheltenham and was connected with a Dr. Coppit.

"Can you come here at once, please. My wife's had a dreadful accident. She's seriously hurt, Doctor. Please hurry!"

He put the telephone down.

Now, the cook.

"Neatly done, sir. Very neatly done," said a voice behind him.

He whirled.

In the darkness of the hallway, barely lit by the light from the bedroom, he saw a slender little man, whose face hung like a dim lantern in the dusk. There was a small leather case around the little man's neck.

"Who the hell are you?" Travers shouted.

"I'm your ghost, sir," said the little man. "Three pounds a week to make the appropriate sounds now and then. And the bright lights too." He pointed to the leather case. "My camera. I use flash bulbs to make the bright lights. A fine effect and there's pictures too—fine clear pictures of people moving in hallways and pictures of dreadful accidents."

There was a long pause.

"I'm free of that now, though. There's ever so much more freedom in haunting a man than a house."

The little man smiled.

"Shall we say fifty pounds a month, sir—for life?"

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Crime! Action! Mystery! Peril!

We once posed this question: Of all the fictional heroes and heroines of your early reading, which one would you want to discover in an unknown feat of detection? You can, of course, rule out Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, Penrod, and D'Artagnan; their creators (Mark Twain, Booth Tarkington, and Alexandre Dumas) have already involved these imperishable characters either in detective episodes or in full-length detective stories.

Our own first nomination—for sheer unexpectedness—was Tarzan of the Apes as a dyed-in-the-blood detective—and we gave you just that (*Tarzan, Jungle Detective,* in the May 1964 issue of EQMM).

Our other nominations—for sheer delight—were Alice in Wonderland as a child criminologist and the Wizard of Oz as a magician-manhunter. But alas and alack, no such 'tec tales by Lewis Carroll and L. Frank Baum are extant so far as we have been able to uncover.

And now we have reason to think of another folk hero as a full-fledged ferret—Frank Merriwell! And while it is possible that his creator did write about the great Frank Merriwell as a sleuth, we have no recollection of ever having read such a story; but we can give you the next best thing—a pastiche-parody starring Frank Merriswell, that "sterling character, that all-time, all-American" youth, as "revived" by Jon L. Breen.

The original stories about Frank Merriwell were written by Burt L. Standish, one of more than a dozen pseudonyms invented and used by Gilbert Patten. "The King of Dime Novels," as Vincent Starrett once crowned Patten (or, put another way, "The Nonpareil of Nickel Noveleers"), wrote the first 20,000-word Merriwell "novel" in four days; it appeared on April 18, 1896 (oh, frabjous day!) in Street and Smith's *Tip Top Weekly* ("An ideal publication for the American Youth"), and Frank Merriwell "novels" were then featured in no less than 986 consecutive issues! Patten was paid a weekly stipend for this colossal continuity—ranging from $60 to $150 per 20,000 words (ah, the good old days!).

It has been estimated that over 500,000,000 copies (five hundred million copies, folks—half a billion!) of the original Frank Merriwell stories were sold. In FRANK MERRIWELL'S "FATHER," An Autobiography

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by Gilbert Patten, Harriet Hinsdale (one of the editors of the autobiography) says that the creator of Frank Merriwell "was a one-man fiction factory, without assistants or sub-writers." And in his review of the autobiography in "The New York Times," Harrison E. Salisbury, the famous newspaperman, described Frank Merriwell as a "Red-Blooded Young American who grew up on the Ideals of Fair Play and Respect for the Rules of the Game, who believes in Honesty and Courage (not to mention Quick Wits)."

Patten's own description of his deathless character? Here is a thumbnail sketch written by "Burt L. Standish" 44 years after the birth in print of the one and only Frank Merriwell: "A young man, clean cut, finely built, supple and graceful yet distinctly athletic . . . His was the strong yet keenly intelligent face of a person of breeding and culture. Yet it was also the face of one in whose heart the flame of human kindness and understanding glowed warm and steady. Something indescribable, like a magnetic aura, seemed to surround him."

And now, meet Frank Merriswell—who is really swell! *Frank Merriswell's Greatest Case; or, The Daring One-Hander* will recall the original Frank Merriwell in every tone and accent. Reading this pastiche-parody will be a delightfully nostalgic experience, an authentic journey to the youthful fiction of two generations ago—a genuine remembrance of thrills past . . .

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FRANK MERRISWELL'S GREATEST CASE;

or, The Daring One-Hander

by JON L. BREEN

"IT'S A MYSTERY, SURE ENOUGH!" said Dandy Denver.

Frank Merriswell, seated across the aisle of the rickety team bus, nodded his head thoughtfully. "I wish I knew what that fellow was after. Too bad we couldn't catch him."

"At least we chased him away before he could do his dirty work, whatever it was," put in Claude Krael. "I don't imagine he'll be back."

"I hope not. At any rate, fellows, let's not let it bother us. Now we must concentrate on the game."

As the bus carrying the Edgerton College basketball team speeds through the winter twilight to the scene of their 1934-35 season-opening encounter with their arch rival, Purnell University, let us look back three days to the mysterious event that was the topic of their discussion.

Late in the evening, long after the Edgerton team had completed its daily practice session, a mysterious figure in a black cape was seen attempting to break into the campus gymnasium. Fortunately, some of the players, returning from an evening of hard study in the library, discovered the intruder at his mischief and were able to chase him away, though failing to apprehend him. Neither were they able to describe him adequately, for his face was hidden by a mask and he moved in a hunched-over attitude. Once they heard him speak—as he sped away, he called back, "I'll get you yet, Frank Merriswell!" The voice, however, was muffled and unfamiliar.

Speculation was rife among the hard-breathing pursuers after they had reluctantly given up the chase.

"Who could he have been? What was he after?"

"He must have been a gambler!"

"I think he had something wrong with his ear."

"Yes, he held his hand over it when he shouted back his insidious threat!"

Frank Merriswell put an end to the discussion. "Well, we can do no more now. Come on, fellows, let's go back to the dormitory and get some sleep. It is important we do not break training—especially this near the opening of the season."

As always, Frank's word was heeded. They returned to their rooms. To a man, however, they

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pledged their undying enmity to any wretch who would raise a hand against Frank Merriswell.

The Garden, as on so many winter evenings, was ablaze with lights. Overcoated crowds lined up before the booths of harried ticket sellers hoping for a last-minute seat, while "scalpers" darted up and down offering their wares; even as they dodged blue-coated officers of the law, they warned the waiting "fans," all too accurately, of the possibility of a sellout.

The cream of society had turned out in chauffeured cars, tuxedos, furs, diamonds. Voices were raised in merriment, as the evening's thrills were anticipated. Many nights the Garden had come to life in this way when the prospects of a breathtakingly frenzied ice hockey match or a long-awaited heavyweight scrap had drawn the city's sports enthusiasts to the Garden like moths to a flame. But tonight a newer attraction had taken hold of the fans—basketball, a sport confined until recently to YMCA's and odoriferous gymnasiums in schools and colleges throughout the land.

The prospects of a healthy gate could be measured by the width of the grin that lit up the friendly face of promoter "Big Nat" Scott, even as the countless electric bulbs illuminated the Garden's own façade. How Big Nat's critics had scoffed when, the season before, he had first announced his plan of bringing Dr. Naismith's game to a big-time sports arena. How they had chortled at his insistence that the hardwood sport could pack in customers as readily as an indoor rodeo, a championship prizefight, or a brisk and bloody spectacle on the ice. And how their taunts had turned to admiring gasps when Big Nat Scott had been proven right, and more and more of the sporting élite, and not-so-élite, had begun to beat a path to the Garden for his well-publicized "cage" doubleheaders.

Now a new basketball season was beginning. Fans of the newly discovered "casaba" sport were swelling the Garden this night in unprecedented numbers, due in large measure to the happy fact that the squads involved in the featured game were the two whose rivalry had captured the imagination and divided the partisanship of sports enthusiasts throughout the area, if not the entire nation, first on the gridiron and now on the court—the two thrilling teams that had been most responsible for Big Nat Scott's gamble paying off—Edgerton's Eagles, coached by the wily old gray fox, Dad Druitt, and Purnell's Purple Ramblers, guided by their youthful mentor, Thad Bradley.

By the time the preliminary game began, there was not a ticket to be had. If President Franklin D. Roosevelt himself had desired admission, it is doubtful that he

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could have been accommodated. Throughout the opening fracas, exciting enough in itself, latecomers continued to arrive in a steady stream. The Garden was packed to the rafters by the time the Edgerton and Purnell fives took to the hardwood to perform their warmup drills.

The lineups for the two teams were these:

EDGERTON:

44 Merriswell, right forward
24 Krael, left forward
10 Polkinghorn, center
11 Denver, right guard
14 Jordan, left guard

PURNELL:

17 Greystoke, right forward
26 Reid, left forward
14 Wayne, center
18 Kent, right guard
32 Cranston, left guard

And though it was printed on the official program in the same size of type as the others, one name stood out to the majority of the spectators as though it were ten inches high——the name of Frank Merriswell, whose daring one-handed shooting style was gradually revolutionizing basketball.

In literally millions of homes throughout the city and state and in odd corners of the nation and world where the nightly signal of powerful KWXC could be heard, however faintly, those unlucky souls who could not see the epochal game in person hung on every syllable uttered by the golden voice of "Chuck" Burns, considered second only to the great Graham MacNamee among radio sportscasters.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the most crucial contest in the glorious history of basketball is only seconds away. Even as I speak, Dad Druitt, coach of Edgerton since 1896 and due to retire from the coaching ranks immediately after tonight's game, handing over the reins to his young assistant Stretch Fabrique, one of the Eagles' greatest stars of the pre-Garden era—Dad Druitt, the man who legend tells us helped Dr. Naismith draw up the rules for this game we all love, is giving his last-minute instructions to his Frank Merriswell-led Eagles. And before the opposing bench, behind the sideline to the left, as we look across from our vantage point here on the Garden floor, young Thad Bradley exhorts his Purple Ramblers to win tonight for the glory of old Purnell.

"Yes, fans, these two fine clubs will battle it out with all the hustle and good sportsmanship they do on the gridiron, and it will all come your way as we try to bring it to you in the most objective and accurate manner possible, trying to impart each thrill as though you were here to see it in person from our vantage point within the swelling confines of the legendary Garden tonight on KWXC, voice of America's greatest city and the whole Western Hemisphere, broadcasting your way with 100,000 watts

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of power from our studio atop the Blatt Building, where you can dance nightly to the music of Cortland Fitzsimmons' orchestra . . ."

"Hey, Merriswell, you showoff, didn't the Lord give you two hands?"

Frank grinned at the good-natured taunt from one of the reserves on the Purnell bench. He was accustomed to the gibes, and they had long since ceased to bother him. Shooting one-handed was as natural to him as eating and sleeping, and it rather surprised him that his unconventional shooting style had made him a controversial figure in the basketball world.

As Frank listened to the instructions of Dad Druitt, a small, bent-over man whom all the players towered over and loved like a father, his eyes traveled seven rows up to Claudia Greystoke's seat. There she sat, the girl he loved more than anyone else in the world. How beautiful she was, the very essence of the true-blue all-American girl. Her face was lovely enough in repose but undescribably beautiful when smiling. Cut out every light, Frank told himself, and that smile could light up the whole Garden all by itself!

Frank knew very well that Claudia's loyalties were divided tonight—her brother Archie was star forward of the Purnell five. What made it worse was that Archie Greystoke was unfriendly to Frank, despite young Merriswell's best efforts to make him a chum. That a man was an adversary on the court did not preclude his being a friend after the final gun had sounded—at least, not to Frank. But Archie apparently felt differently.

After asking herself so many times whom to cheer for when Edgerton and Purnell did meet, Claudia had recently decided to cheer everybody, even the referees. This met with Frank's approval, for to him a clean, well-fought game was what really mattered, not the winning or losing, although it was important to him always to do his best in any endeavor, and thus he had little experience in losing.

It must be hastily pointed out that these extraneous thoughts of Frank's were not preventing him from giving his full attention to the words of the wily old gray fox, coach Dad Druitt. Well Frank realized the importance of the coach's pre-game instructions, for they could have great bearing on the strategy employed in the game.

"Boys, this is it for me. For me this is goodbye to Edgerton. I love Edgerton, and I know you do, too. I want to win tonight—not for myself, not so I can retire to my rose garden and my stamp collection and my trophy room, just an old relic of the past. I want to win tonight—not for you boys, because you have a long season in front of you, and I know that for you and your new coach Stretch Fabrique there will be many more nights like

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this, many more games to play, many more battles to win.

"But I want to win—I want *you* to win for something bigger than any of us—than all of us, in fact—I want you to win for Edgerton! Our Edgerton! The school we all love, and my old heart has as great a capacity to love her green trees and ivy-covered walls and traditions and friendships as yours, I assure you. As you go out on that floor tonight, boys, I want you to remember one thing and one thing only—and that one thing will carry you through greater battles than this one—that one thing will help you climb mountains and ford rivers and build empires. I want you to remember and carry in your heart—you're an Edgerton Eagle! Now get out there—and win!"

More than one player desperately choked back a tear. And one starting player, to whom it had never been made clear which of the Purple Ramblers he was to guard, refrained from saying anything in order not to detract from the drama of the occasion.

"Stay by that radio, fans. The Eagles are breaking their huddle, and the game will soon be under way. Thad Bradley continues to speak to his Ramblers—good evening, Mr. Mayor! Enjoy the game!

"A West Coast correspondent writes to tell us that a couple of players out there are experimenting with what is called a 'jump shot'—that is, one in which the shooter releases the ball while leaping in the air. Many basketball observers insist that this shot will be the next new innovation to revolutionize basketball.

"Well, fans, old Chuck doesn't buy this contention for a minute—no, we just don't see it. These trick shots depend upon the unique skills of their proponents. As we were remarking to Al Jolson the other night, it is doubtful that another player will appear in twenty years who has the exceptional coordination that allows Frank Merriswell to shoot with only one hand. It takes almost abnormal balance. And Al said, 'Chuck, I agree.'

"For the opening tip at center it'll be towering Pole Polkinghorn, at six feet five, jumping for Edgerton. Basketball men assure me that six five is the maximum height for an effective basketball player. Boys who grow beyond this size tend to be too poorly coordinated to keep up with the smaller, faster men. Polkinghorn is far more agile than most of the game's giants—he's a fine player, but take it from old Chuck, fans, this is a small man's game, and when the center jump after each basket is eliminated, as they already have done on the Pacific Coast, the tall man will be even more out of his element. As we said, Polkinghorn will jump for Edgerton against Wayne, the Purnell center, a shorter man but of great leaping ability.

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"We're set to go. The referee puts it up and it's Wayne outjumping Polkinghorn, the ball goes to Kent. Kent, the running guard of Purnell, dribbles to the top of the key. He hooks a fine pass to Archie Greystoke, the powerfully built, heavily muscled Purple mainstay. Greystoke shoots, but it's no good. Polkinghorn up for the rebound—he whips a Dizzy Dean strike to Merriswell en route downcourt. Edgerton fastbreaks. It's Merriswell to Denver and back to Merriswell who shoots a one-hander and *scores!*

"That unorthodox shot of Merriswell's has the Garden crowd gasping in wonder and amazement. The Eagles lead, two to nothing. They're always alert, these Eagles, a tribute to the flawless and unmatched coaching skill of the wily old gray fox, Dad Druitt. As Al Smith used to tell me—but that story will have to wait.

"Again the center jump, and this time it's Polkinghorn tipping the ball to Dandy Denver, his running guard. Denver deliberately dribbles into front court, setting up a play, on KWXC, voice of the Western Hemisphere. The Eagles have many fine set plays, thanks in great part to the brilliant strategic mind of the wily old gray fox, Dad Druitt. Watch for his out-of-bounds plays, too; they're copied by every coach in the country. It's over to Jordan, back to Denver, now to the postman Polkinghorn, as they whip the ball around looking for a man with an open shot . . ."

And on the game went. Edgerton took a short lead; Purnell pulled even. Then it was Purnell with a lead, neutralized by Edgerton. And all the Garden fans, whatever their partisanship, agreed that Frank Merriswell was playing . . .

". . . his greatest game ever! No athlete in any sport amateur or professional has ever performed as brilliantly as Frank Merriswell tonight! There's no Babe Ruth, no Bill Tilden, no Bobby Jones, no Paavo Nurmi, no Jack Dempsey, no Red Grange. Tonight there's only Frank Merriswell, and the Garden is his, and old Chuck is proud to be here to bring you the action.

"Three minutes remain in the first half with Purnell and Edgerton tied at sixteen-all. It's Dandy Denver speeding downcourt like Twenty Grand—a long pass to Merriswell who scores on his famous one-hander for his twelfth point of the half, and Edgerton leads. Oh, that one-hander! It's the greatest trick shot in the history of the game! Good shot, Frank! 'Thank you, Chuck,' he replies—what a sportsman he is!

"Here's the tap and it goes to Merriswell. He passes to Krael, in perfect position for his favorite shot from thirty feet out on a sixty-degree angle to the baseline. Krael practices that shot for hours on end—but this time he just misses—the

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rebound comes off and Polkinghorn and Greystoke go for the ball. Greystoke plows into Polkinghorn, who goes down like a fallen tree—the ball to Merriswell who shoots—but he, too, is plowed into by Greystoke, and they both go down as the ball goes in to make it 20-16, Edgerton leading. Bodies are scattered all over the Garden floor now, and Frank Merriswell may be hurt! Has the great Eagle star been injured?

"Hey, wait a minute! Krael of Edgerton is mixing it up with Greystoke! Merriswell has leaped to his feet to try to break it up, but we may have a donnybrook here, as fights start to break out all over the Garden floor. The refs are powerless to stop it. The two benches are both empty now. The Edgerton players think Greystoke purposely tried to injure Merriswell. What a brawl! It may be the greatest brawl in Garden history, and old Chuck's seen them all! But wait a minute!

"Suddenly they all stop and stare at the inert form under the Eagles' basket. They realize even as we do that Pole Polkinghorn has not moved since he fell! What has happened to the Edgerton center? Dad Druitt and the Edgerton players surround him now as the Garden doctor rushes to the fallen giant's side. He still has not moved! And the fear of serious injury to a fine lad has stopped what could have been the biggest riot in the history of competitive sport. KWXC will stay on hand to keep you informed, fans. This is Chuck Burns here at the Garden . . ."

"Give him air," someone was imploring.

Dr. Kelsey, the Garden physician, could have said at that moment that Pole Polkinghorn needed no air, nor would he ever again, but he thought it better not to make such a pronouncement until the poor lad's body had been removed to the dressing room.

After Polkinghorn's body was removed, the game resumed. Dad Druitt left the game in Stretch Fabrique's hands as he accompanied the stretcher to the Eagle dressing room. It was not until the first half was in its last seconds that Dad Druitt was informed that Pole was beyond help.

The Garden crowd was not informed that Pole Polkinghorn was dead. It was agreed by all concerned that the second half should be played as usual. As Frank so aptly expressed it, "Pole would have wanted it that way."

After the game, the scene in the Eagle dressing room was chaotic. All the players on the two teams, plus everyone else who had been on the floor at the time of the unfortunate incident, had been called together by the police for interrogation.

Dandy Denver attempted to

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throttle Archie Greystoke on sight. Even as his fellow players restrained him, Denver cried, "You bushleaguer! I don't know how Pole died, but I do know you killed him! That was the dirtiest play I ever saw!"

"I play rough, yes, but never dirty," insisted the obviously shaken Greystoke.

Meanwhile, Dad Druitt was informing reporters of his decision to stay on for the remainder of the season as Edgerton coach. "This is a necessary move on my part to attempt to rebuild and encourage the team following Polkinghorn's tragic death. We will dedicate the rest of the season to Pole and attempt to lead all our lives in the great clean-living tradition that was typical of Pole's conduct at all times."

When some semblance of order was restored, the assembled group was informed of a startling discovery that Dr. Kelsey had made.

"The jarring blow by Mr. Greystoke is not what killed young Polkinghorn," the doctor said. Archie sighed in obvious relief, and Claudia patted his hand. "No, the murder weapon was this." And the doctor held up a short hypodermic needle. "This needle was found in Pole Polkinghorn's kneeguard. The man who put it there murdered him."

Although the group was already silent, it now seemed as though a hush had fallen over them. Suddenly Claudia Greystoke screamed.

"Is this too much for you, Claudia?" asked Frank.

"No, Frank, I'll be all right," said Claudia in a barely audible voice. "It's only that I've just realized I'm in a men's locker room."

"We're all dressed, lady," said one of the plainclothes-men. "Go on, Doc. How was the trick pulled?"

"The needle was simply wedged into the inner part of Polkinghorn's kneeguard. It was encased, however, in a small cellophane wrapper. As the players ran up and down the floor, the point of the needle broke through the cellophane and pricked Polkinghorn's knee. As soon as the deadly poison entered Polkinghorn's bloodstream, he was a dead man. That's all there is to it."

"Murder wrapped in cellophane," the police sergeant mused.

Of a sudden Frank Merriswell stepped forward. "Officer," he said in a hushed tone. "I fear this cruel fate was meant for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Before the first game in our junior year, Pole Polkinghorn and I exchanged kneeguards for luck. We won that game, and ever since he has worn my kneeguards and I his. You will note that the fatal kneeguard has on it the initials F.M. Those I wear have the initials P.P. The exchange was known only to ourselves—not even to our teammates. I fear I must conclude

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that Pole has died in my stead."

"So it would seem," the policeman agreed.

"Who could have done this?" cried Claudia.

"It could have been anyone who was in the locker room and had access to our kneeguards before the game," Frank mused.

Suddenly Dandy Denver took another leap toward Archie Greystoke, shouting, "You did it! You killed Pole!"

When Denver had been effectively restrained by Stretch Fabrique and Frank Merriswell, the police sergeant asked him what he meant.

"I saw Archie Greystoke sneaking around in our dressing room before the game. I was about to confront him and ask him what he was doing, but he snuck out."

"Is this true, Greystoke? Were you in here before the game?"

"Sure, I was in here, but I didn't kill Polkinghorn. I know they say I'd do anything to win, but not murder! You must believe me!"

"What were you doing in here?"

"I wanted to see Merriswell. I wanted to talk to him."

"About what?" the policeman inquired.

Archie stared at his shoes. "I'd rather not say. It's personal."

"You and Merriswell don't get along too well, do you, Greystoke?"

"Well, after all, he plays for Edgerton and I for Purnell. We are natural rivals."

"But it goes further than that, doesn't it, Greystoke?" said the enraged Dandy Denver.

"I don't like him. I admit that." Archie looked straight at Frank as he made this admission.

"You warned him to stay away from your sister!" Dandy charged.

"I suppose I did," said Archie sullenly. "In fact, that's what I wanted to say to him tonight. I was going to give him one last warning. And I give it now!" he burst out, glaring at Frank.

"Why don't you want Merriswell to see your sister, Greystoke?" the detective persisted.

"How would you like your sister to marry some prissy fop who shoots a basketball with one hand? That's not basketball, shooting with one hand. Is that what you call basketball?"

"I don't know much about basketball, but this is what I call murder. And I think I have a pretty good suspect."

Archie shook his head unbelievingly and said no more. Everyone else who'd been on the floor was questioned perfunctorily, but the police seemed satisfied they'd found their man. Before many minutes had passed, all of those assembled but one had been invited to go home. That one was Archie Greystoke, who found himself under arrest on suspicion of murder.

"Frank," said Claudia Greystoke, "we can't allow Archie to be rail-

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roared like this." The glum five-some, consisting of Claudia, Frank, Dad Druitt, Stretch Fabrique, and Dean Garfield of Edgerton, sat in a popular campus gathering place drinking coffee and discussing the case.

"The police don't have a very strong case, my dear," said Dean Garfield comfortingly. The dean of Edgerton, though not an old gray fox, matched Dad Druitt in fatherliness. "So many people were in the dressing room before the game. There were reporters and that radio fellow, Chuck Burns, and I saw Mr. Scott, the Garden promoter, in there talking to the players. And the opposing coach, Thad Bradley, came in to wish Coach Druitt good luck."

"You were in there, too, Dean," Dad Druitt pointed out drily.

"Of course, Coach Druitt," the Dean agreed. "I was not trying to conceal my own status as a suspect." This good-natured joke on himself, so typical of the man, would ordinarily have been followed by a hearty laugh. Because of the solemnity of the occasion, the dean restrained it to a mere chuckle. "In any event, anyone who was in the locker room could have put that deadly needle in Frank's kneeguard. Thus, I hardly think the police have a strong case against Miss Greystoke's brother, whom, I might add, I have always respected as an athlete, despite the fact he played for Purnell."

"I don't know," muttered Dad Druitt. "He can't move to his left at all. Good rebounder, though."

"The police seem so convinced," Claudia lamented. A sudden inspiration struck her. "If they won't do anything, we must call in a detective. Not a police detective, but a real detective—you know, an amateur."

"Fleming Stone is a good man," muttered Dad Druitt. "They say he can come in a couple of weeks after the crime is committed, when the trail is cold, and wrap things up in a matter of minutes."

"Professor Craig Kennedy is still at Columbia University," Dean Garfield put in. "But I fear he's dreadfully outmoded by now."

"There's that chap Philo Vance," said Stretch Fabrique. "They say he's slipping some these days, though. Insufferable chap to have around, too, or so they say."

Other names were considered. Ellery Queen came in for a measure of support. Dean Garfield was seen to go a little pale when the name of Sam Spade came up.

Finally, Frank Merriswell said, "As a last resort, we might call in one of these inquiry agents, but not yet. I propose to turn detective myself. I'd like to avenge Pole's terrible murder personally!"

"Frank, you must be careful," said Claudia.

"I will," he promised. "But I want to make you a pledge, Claudia. I believe in Archie's innocence

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just as you do. And I promise you now that when Edgerton and Purnell play again in two weeks' time, your brother will be back in the fray, fighting for Purnell, the cloud of suspicion lifted forever from his head. That is my pledge."

Claudia found it hard to believe such a consummation could be achieved. But she had faith, for those who knew him learned very early the folly of doubting the word of Frank Merriswell.

As the two weeks passed, Frank Merriswell said nothing to his teammates about his attempts to unmask the real murderer. Most of the Eagles seemed to feel that Archie Greystoke was indeed the guilty man, and Frank, while not expressing any feigned agreement on the matter, swallowed his arguments to the contrary. It was not that Frank suspected any of his teammates of complicity in the crime—such an idea was unthinkable—but he thought that in this case he could best achieve his aims and achieve justice by playing a lone hand.

In the two weeks' period each of the traditional rivals played two games on its home court, as the two teams prepared to meet again on the neutral Garden site. Edgerton, with the other players giving a little extra to make up for the loss of Polkinghorn, won both their games. Purnell, on the other hand, injured by the incarceration of their mainstay, failed miserably, losing by lopsided scores. Immediately rumors began to circulate that Thad Bradley's job as coach was in dire jeopardy.

When the Edgerton team left the campus for the Garden the afternoon of the rematch, Frank Merriswell was mysteriously missing. It was unheard of for the All-American to miss the team bus, and the coaches and players were baffled by his absence.

"Coach!" cried Dandy Denver. "We can't leave without him!"

Dad Druitt, a worried old gray fox, took a last glance at his watch. "We must," he said simply. "We cannot wait a minute longer. As it is, we'll only arrive just in time for our warmup drills."

Reluctantly, they boarded the bus.

In many ways the scene at the Garden seemed a duplication of that of another night two weeks before. The same lights were lit to the same level of brightness, and Big Nat Scott's smile had about the same wattage. The same familiar faces looked on along Press Row. The personnel of the two teams had changed—Greystoke and Polkinghorn were absent, as expected, of course. But the big question, as the scheduled time for the featured game came near, was this: "Where is Frank Merriswell? Why are his Eagle teammates doing their warmup drills without him?"

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Chuck Burns was among those puzzled. "Where is Frank Merriswell? Well, fans, your guess is as good as mine. Old Chuck is just as baffled as any of the 20,000 fans swelling the legendary Garden. With game time only seconds away —hey, wait a minute! That roar from the crowd tells the story, fans! Frank Merriswell has returned! We see him now, the great All-American in street clothes, talking to several police officers near the scorekeeper's table. Now the discussion appears ended—it was very brief, but the police are nodding their heads as though Frank has settled something to their satisfaction. I don't know what this discussion was about, fans, but we will do our best to find out for you later. Now Merriswell is sprinting back toward the dressing room and one of the police is sprinting toward the exit. It looks like the greatest basketballer in history *will* be in action here tonight after all! It also appears that the police have found out some information greatly to their interest. Stay by the radio, fans!"

Archie Greystoke, sitting disconsolately on the edge of his jail cot, heard the guard's footsteps suddenly break the oppressive silence. For the first few days of his imprisonment, he had leaped to his feet in eager anticipation when anyone came near. Now, however, he seemed to have lost all hope—his glazed eyes continued to stare straight ahead, as if the sound meant nothing to him.

"Greystoke!" the jailer's familiar voice shouted. "You're cleared! You can go!"

For a moment the words made no impression. Then gradually their implications began to seep through to Archie's numbed brain. He looked up, a remnant of hope glowing in his eye. "What? What did you say? You can't have said—"

"I did say! You're a free man. Frank Merriswell has produced the evidence to clear you. You can go home. Or, more to the point, you can go to the Garden!"

Archie had now rushed over to grip the bars as the jailer turned his big key in the lock. "Really? Is there time?"

"Sure, with a police escort! There's a motorcycle cop waiting for you in front of the jail." Before Archie could dash down the cell block to his freedom, the jailer gripped his hand. "I knew you were all right, Greystoke. Good luck against Edgerton!"

A few minutes later, with 20,000 people looking on in wonder and amazement, that beefy right hand of Archie Greystoke's was shaking the corresponding member of his long-time rival, Frank Merriswell.

"Merriswell," Greystoke said in a husky voice, "you're a real sportsman. You're truly a brick. I'm sorry I misjudged you. I can think of no

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finer man for my sister to marry."

"I have longed for the day we might be friends, Greystoke. You have shown yourself to be a courageous and gallant gentleman in the finest tradition tonight, and you do great credit to yourself, your college, and your country."

"If I can ever hold aloft the banner of fair play and justice that you have hoisted tonight, Merriswell, I shall walk proudly indeed in the sunshine of contentment and self-esteem."

"Greystoke, your words inspire me. Our loyalties to our respective schools are fine and noble emotions, but we cannot let them obscure our higher loyalty to truth and beauty and the ideals of American sport."

"How true! And adherence to the rule of sport trains us for adherence to fair play in the bigger game of life."

At this point someone reminded the rivals that their conversation was delaying the second half of the contest, in which Edgerton had a good lead of 25 to 13.

"Well, Frank," said Archie Greystoke, "I hope you realize that our new-found camaraderie does not deter my resolve soundly to thrash you in the second half."

"I wouldn't want it any other way, Archie," returned Frank, giving the Purnell stalwart's hand one last brotherly shake. Then, to the appreciative clapping of 40,000 hands and the cheers of 20,000 hoarse throats (and none cheered louder than Claudia Greystoke), they returned to their respective benches.

"This is Chuck Burns at the Garden, fans, with tonight's post-game show. What a thriller we had in the Garden tonight, fans! One of the greatest games old Chuck has ever seen! And our guest tonight in none other than the All-American forward of Edgerton, Frank Merriswell. Congratulations on a great game, Frank!"

"Thank you, Mr. Burns."

"Please, it's Chuck. What would you say was the outstanding factor in Edgerton's victory tonight?"

"Well, Chuck, in the first half our fast break was working very well, and we had good rebounding. In the second half we lost control of the boards to some extent. It was our good outside shooting in the final five minutes that permitted us to stave off Purnell's determined rally, led, I would like to say, by Archie Greystoke."

"But you came on to win it, like true champions, by a score of 39 to 34. And I feel you are far too modest about your own contribution in the game, Frank. You had 25 big points."

"I was lucky. My one-hander was working well, but it was only the great passing of my teammates that made victory possible. I think the really outstanding player was Greystoke in a losing cause."

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"Right! Archie Greystoke had 15 points in the second half. I understand that Purnell's fine showing may save Thad Bradley's job."

"That's good news, for he's a fine coach."

"And we can't say too much, can we, Frank, about the brilliant coaching of the wily old gray fox, Dad Druitt?"

"No, Chuck, we can't say too much about Dad Druitt."

"Frank, you arrived late to the game tonight. Mind telling us why?"

"Well, Chuck, I was gathering evidence to clear Archie Greystoke. I ordinarily would have had plenty of time to get back to college and catch the team bus, but I was waylaid by some gamblers who imprisoned me in their evil den for a few hours, tied to a chair. My trusty Boy Scout knife saved me, but I could not escape until near game time. I gave my evidence to the police, and the gamblers have by now received their due reward."

"Good news, indeed, Frank. And might I ask if your evidence included any clues to the real murderer of Pole Polkinghorn?"

"Chuck, I'm glad you asked me that question. In fact, I found conclusive evidence. If you will look around you, you will note several uniformed policemen. As soon as you leave the air, they will arrest *you* for the murder of Pole Polkinghorn."

"Me?"

"I found evidence in the office of one of the city's best-known gamblers that you have long been connected with illicit gambling in this city—also that you stood to lose heavily if Edgerton won that game two weeks ago."

"Why did you first suspect me, Frank?"

"I first hypothesized that the skulking figure who tried to break into our gymnasium at college and the murderer of Pole Polkinghorn were one and the same man. When the skulking figure called back his threat against me, he put one hand over his ear, a well-known mannerism of sports broadcasters, yourself included. At this very moment you are holding your hand over one ear.

"Also, a friend of mine who heard your broadcast told me that when we were all on the floor, you cried, 'Merriswell may be hurt!' I was not hurt, nor was I evincing any pain, and you will remember that I leaped to my feet almost at once to help stop the fighting. And yet you seemed to think I was the one who was injured.

"You could only have made that mistake if you expected *me* to be hurt, and as we all know, the fate of Polkinghorn was clearly intended for me. Additionally, there are many witnesses to your presence in our locker room before the game. These facts were plenty to make me suspect you. The evidence I gathered in our city's gambling

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dens only substantiated what I suspected."

"Frank, I must say that was the greatest piece of deductive analysis in the history of amateur detective work. And I've been honored to have you as my last guest."

"Thank you, Chuck."

"For being our guest we'd like you to have this $10 gift certificate from Clark's Department Store. Get something nice for yourself or your lovely fiancée."

"My pleasure, Chuck. Oh, if I could, I'd like to say hello to the gang over at Edgerton. Our team bus should be back at about midnight. See you soon, fellows."

"Thank you, Frank. Again the final score, Edgerton 39, Purnell 34. This is Chuck Burns at the Garden, returning you to our KWXC studio high atop the beautiful Blatt Building for a musical interlude by Cortland Fitzsimmons and his orchestra."

EDITORIAL COMMENT: A note on nomenclature: Did the names of the Purnell players strike chords in your memory? Did the names seem to have a curiously familiar ring? They should have!

(Right forward) Greystoke—Tarzan's real name
(Left forward) Reid—The Green Hornet
(Center) Wayne—Batman
(Right guard) Kent—Superman
(Left guard) Cranston—The Shadow

Holy heroes!

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a *NEW* detective story by
EDWARD D. HOCH

Two men in northern Canada, 200 miles from civilization: one man is murdered, the other man is innocent. No possibility whatsoever of an outsider being involved . . . How can such things be?

THE IMPOSSIBLE "IMPOSSIBLE CRIME"

by EDWARD D. HOCH

I'M NO DETECTIVE. IN FACT, MOST OF the time I'm more of a snowman, plowing through head-high drifts and 70-mile winds that plague us nine months of the year in the barren area of northern Canada beyond the permafrost line. But when you're living all alone with one other man, 200 miles from the nearest settlement, and one day that only other man is murdered—well, that's enough to make a detective out of anybody.

His name was Charles Fuller, and my name is Henry Bowfort. Charlie was a full professor at Boston University when I met him, teaching an advanced course in geology while he worked on a highly technical volume concerning the effects of permafrost on subsurface mineral deposits. I was an assistant in his department and we struck up a friendship at once, perhaps helped along by the fact that I was newly married to a sparkling blonde named Grace who caught his eye from the very beginning.

Charlie's own wife had divorced him some ten years earlier and vanished into the wilderness of Southern California, and he was at a stage in his life when any sort of charming feminine companionship aroused his basic maleness. The three of us dined together regularly, and a close friendship developed along fairly predictable lines.

Fuller was in his early forties at the time, a good ten years older than Grace and me, and for as long as we'd known him he'd talked often about the project closest to his heart. "Before I'm too old for it," he'd say, "I want to spend a year above the permafrost line."

His opportunity came before any of us thought it would, and one day he announced he would be spending his sabbatical at a research post in northern Canada, near the western shore of Hudson Bay. "I've been given a foundation grant for eight months' study," he said. "It's a great opportunity. I'll never have another like it."

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"You're going up there alone?" Grace asked.

"Actually, I was hoping I could prevail on your husband to accompany me."

I blinked and must have looked a bit startled. "Eight months in the wilds of nowhere with nothing but snow?"

And Charlie Fuller smiled. "Nothing but snow. How about it, Grace? Could you give him up for eight months?"

"If he wants to go," she answered loyally. She had never tried to stand in the way of anything I'd wanted to do.

We talked about it for a long time that night, but I already knew I was hooked. I was on my way to northern Canada with Charlie Fuller.

The cabin—when we reached it by plane and boat and snowmobile—was a surprisingly comfortable place well stocked with enough provisions for a year's stay. We had two-way radio contact with the outside world, plus necessary medical supplies and a bookcase full of reading material, all thoughtfully provided by the foundation that was financing the permafrost study.

The cabin consisted of three large rooms—a laboratory for our study, a combination living-room-and-kitchen, and a bedroom with a bath partitioned off in one corner. We'd brought our own clothes, and Fuller had brought a rifle, too, to discourage scavenging animals.

We had all the comforts of home, and we settled in for a long winter's stay.

The daily routine with Charlie Fuller was great fun at first. He was surely a dedicated man, and one of the most intelligent I'd ever known. We would rise early in the morning, breakfast together, and then go off in search of ore samples. We came to know the places where the endless winds chafed against bare rock, where the earth was shielded from the deep blanket of snow. And best of all in those early days, there was the constant radio communication with Grace. Her almost nightly messages, staticky and distorted as they were, brought a touch of Boston to the Northwest Territory.

But after a time Grace's messages thinned to one or two a week, and finally to one every other week. Fuller and I began to get on each other's nerves, and often in the mornings I'd be awakened by the sound of rifle fire as he stood outside the cabin door taking random shots at the occasional snowy owl or arctic ground squirrel that wandered near. We still had the snowmobile, but it was 200 miles to the nearest settlement at Caribou, making a Saturday night's trip into town out of the question.

Once, during the evening meal which had grown monotonous with repetition, Fuller said, "Bet you miss her, don't you, Hank?"

"Grace? Sure I miss her. It's been a long time."

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"Think she's sitting home nights waiting for us—for you?"

I put down my fork. "What's that supposed to mean, Charlie?"

"Nothing—nothing at all."

But the rest of the evening passed under a cloud. By this time we had been up there nearly five months, and it was just too long.

Christmas came and went, and the winter wind howled outside from morning to night. We fought our way through the snow to gather specimens when we could, and spent the worst of the days in the small lab running tests. The cabin's heat came from a single gas stove for which we had a number of fuel tanks, and the light was supplied by a small generating unit. It wasn't exactly like home, but it would have been passable except for the human element.

It was fantastic, it was unreasonable, but up there—200 miles from the nearest human being—there began to develop between us a sort of rivalry for my wife. An unspoken rivalry, to be sure, a rivalry for a woman nearly 2000 miles away—but still a rivalry.

"What do you think she's doing right now, Hank?"

Or—

"I wish Grace were here tonight. Warm the place up a bit. Right, Hank?"

Finally, one evening in January, when a particularly heavy snow had chained us to the inside of the cabin for two long days and nights, the rivalry came to a head. Charlie Fuller was seated at the rough wooden table we used for meals and paperwork and I was in my usual chair facing one of the windows.

"We're losing a lot of heat out of this place," I commented. "Look at those damn icicles."

"I'll go out later and knock them down," he said.

I could tell he was in a bad mood and suspected he'd been drinking from the adequate supply of Scotch we'd brought along. "We might as well make the best of each other," I said. "We're stuck here for another few months together."

"Worried, Hank? Anxious to be back in bed with that luscious wife of yours?"

"Let's cut out the cracks about Grace, huh? I'm getting sick of it, Charlie."

"That's too bad!" He left the table and went into the lab. After a moment I followed him in and found to my surprise that he was slumped against a cabinet, staring at the floor. "Leave me alone," he said.

"Are you sick?"

"Sick of this place, sick of you!"

"Then let's go back."

"In this storm?"

"We've got the snowmobile."

"No. No, this is one project I can't walk out on."

"Why not? Is it worth this torture day after day?"

"You don't understand." He turned to face me, just barely in control of his emotions. Oddly,

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though, the anger seemed to have passed from him, replaced by something very close to despair. "I didn't start out life being a geologist. My field was biology, and I had great plans for being a research scientist at some major pharmaceutical house. They pay very well, you know."

"What happened?"

He leaned against the wall to steady himself. "The damnedest thing, Hank. I couldn't work with animals. I couldn't experiment on them, kill them. I don't think I could ever kill a living thing."

"What about the animals and birds you shoot at?"

"That's just the point, Hank. I never hit them! I try to, but I purposely miss! That's why I went into geology—rocks, the earth. That was the only safe thing, the only field in which I wouldn't make a fool of myself."

"You couldn't make a fool of yourself, Charlie. Even if we called it quits and went back today, the University would still welcome you. You'd still have your professorship."

"I've got to succeed at something, Hank." He ran a hand through his graying hair. "Don't you understand? It's too late for another failure—too late in life to start over again!"

He didn't mention Grace the rest of that day, but I had the sinking sensation that he hadn't just been talking about his work. His first marriage had been a failure, too. Was he trying to tell me he had to succeed with Grace?

I slept poorly that night, first because Charlie had decided to walk around the cabin at midnight knocking icicles from the roof, and then because the wind had changed direction and set up a banshee wail in the chimney. I got up once after Charlie was in bed, to look outside, but the windows were frosted over by the wind-driven snow. I could see nothing but the crystal formations of frost on every pane.

Toward morning I drifted into an uneasy sleep, broken now and then by the occasional bird sounds which told me the storm had ended. It would be pleasant, perhaps even sunny—though the bitter subzero cold might remain for days. I heard Charlie up and around, preparing breakfast, though I paid little attention, trying to get a bit more sleep. An icicle fell, clattering against the side of the cabin.

Then, sometime later, I sprang awake, knowing I had heard it. A shot! Could Charlie be outside again, firing at the animals? I stretched out in the bed, waiting for some other sound, but nothing reached my ears except the perking of the coffee pot on the gas stove. Finally I got out of bed and went into the other room.

Charlie Fuller was seated in my chair at the bare table, staring at the wall. A tiny stream of blood was

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running down his forehead and into one eye. He was dead.

It took me some moments to comprehend the mere fact of his death, and even after I'd located the bullet wound just above his hairline, I still could not bring myself to fully accept the reality of it. My first thought had been suicide, but now that I had time to let my eyes search the floor and table I could see this was impossible. The bullet had obviously killed him instantly, and there was no weapon anywhere in sight.

I covered every inch of the room, even looked at the ceiling. There was no gun anywhere—in fact, Fuller's rifle was missing from its usual place in the corner near the door.

But if not suicide, what?

There was no other explanation. Somehow he had killed himself. I warmed up the radio and sent a message to the effect, telling them I'd bring in the body by snowmobile as soon as I could. Our venture into the country above the permafrost line was at an end.

Then, as I was starting to pack my things, I remembered the coffee. I'd turned off the stove sometime during my search, and even taken a sip of the coffee, all without giving it a thought. Do men about to commit suicide start making breakfast? Do they put a pot of coffee on the stove?

And then I had to face it. Charlie Fuller had not killed himself.

All right. It seemed utterly impossible—but there it was. I sat down opposite the body, then got up to cover it with a blanket, and then sat down again.

What were all the possibilities? Suicide, accident, murder—as simple as that. Not suicide. Not accident. He certainly hadn't been cleaning his gun at the time.

That left only one possibility.

Murder.

By myself or by an outsider—the only two possibilities.

Certainly I hadn't killed Charlie, even in my sleep. I'd come to as soon as I heard the shot, and I'd still been in bed.

I walked over and crouched behind his chair, trying to see what he must have been seeing in that final moment.

And then I saw it. Directly opposite, in the center of a frosted window, there was a tiny hole with wisps of snow already drifting in. I hadn't noticed it before—the intricate crystal-like designs of the frost had effectively camouflaged the hole. A few cracks ran from it, but the snow had somehow kept the window from shattering completely.

It was with a sudden sense of exhiliration that I made the discovery. The bullet had come from outside—the mystery was solved!

But as soon as I put on my coat and ventured outdoors, I realized that a greater mystery had taken its place. Though the drifting snow had left a narrow walkway under

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the overhanging roof of the cabin, drifts higher than my head surrounded us on all sides. Even the snowmobile was all but covered. No one could have approached the cabin through that snow, and certainly not without leaving a visible trail.

I made my way past fallen icicles, some as thick around as my arm, to the punctured window. The snow had drifted a bit beneath it, but I saw at once the butt of Fuller's rifle protruding from the whiteness. I pulled it out and stared at it, wondering what it could tell me. It had been recently fired, it was the murder weapon, but there was nothing more it could say.

I took it back into the cabin and sat down. Just the two of us, no one else, and somebody had murdered Charlie Fuller. That narrowed down the suspects considerably.

As the day passed into noon and the sun appeared finally low in the southern sky, I knew I would have to be moving out soon. I did not relish another night in the cabin with Fuller's body, and the trip by snowmobile would easily take the remainder of the brief daylight hours and part of the night as well. For a time I debated making for Hudson Bay instead of Caribou, radioing ahead for a ski plane to pick us up. But could I go back, by any route or means, under the circumstances? Charlie Fuller was dead, and I had to discover how it had happened.

Pacing the cabin, gazing unseeing at the empty laboratory, I knew the answer must lurk here somewhere, within the wooden walls of our temporary home. I went back in my mind over our conversations about Grace. He had loved her, he had wanted her—of that much I was certain. Could he have committed suicide in such a manner that I would be accused of his murder?

No, there were two things against that theory—it wouldn't get him Grace, and it wouldn't get me convicted of the crime. Because even now I was all alone with the physical evidence. I could change the scene any way I wanted, invent any story I liked. Chances are, the police would never even make the trip to the cabin to check my story. I had already called it suicide in my radio report, but I could change it to accident. And there was no one to call it murder.

No one but myself.

I went outside again and started sifting through the snow where I'd found the rifle. But there was nothing—a few bits of icicle, but nothing more. Here and there one of Fuller's footprints remained undrifted, from his icicle-breaking expedition, but I could identify no other prints. If someone had stood at that window to kill Charlie Fuller—

But no one could have! I stared at the window with growing wonder. The snow and crystallized frost had made it completely opaque, as

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I'd already noticed during the night. Even if an invisible murderer had dropped from the sky, and somehow got Charlie's rifle out of the cabin, he could not have fired at Charlie through that window because he could not have seen him through it!

So where did that leave me?

I went back inside to the rifle, emptied it, and tried the trigger. It had been adjusted to a hair trigger —the slightest pressure of my finger was enough to click the hammer on the empty chamber.

Suddenly I felt that I was on the verge of it, that I almost had the answer. I stood staring at the blanket-covered figure in the chair, then went outside and looked through the bullet hole at it again. Lined up perfectly, even through an opaque window.

And then I knew who had murdered Charlie Fuller.

I was staring at his body in the chair, but it was *my* chair! Twenty minutes, a half hour later, and I would have been sitting in that very chair, eating breakfast. Charlie would have called me when the coffee was ready, and I would have come out to sit in that chair, as I did every morning.

And Charlie Fuller would have killed me.

It took me five minutes of excited sorting through the bits of icicle in the snow under the window to find the one that was something more. It was ice, all right, but ice encased in a tiny heat-sealed plastic pouch. We used pouches of all sizes in the lab, for the rock specimens we collected. This one had served a different purpose.

Charlie had driven one of the large icicles into the snow and balanced the rifle on top of it—probably freezing it to the icicle with a few drops of water. Then he'd wiped away a tiny speck of frost on the window to line up the gun barrel with the chair in which I would be sitting. He'd fixed the rifle with a hair trigger, and then jammed the tiny plastic pouch of water between the front of the trigger and the guard.

When the water in the pouch froze, the ice expanded against the trigger, and the rifle fired through the window at the chair. The recoil had thrown the rifle free of its icicle support, and the frozen pouch of water had dropped into the snow like a simple piece of ice.

And what had gone wrong? Charlie Fuller must have timed the freezing of the water-filled pouch, but he probably hadn't timed it in subzero cold with a wind blowing. The water had simply frozen sooner than he'd planned—while he was sitting in my chair for a moment, adjusting it to the precise all-important position facing the window.

But why had he gone to all that trouble to kill me when we were alone? I thought about that all the way back to Caribou in the snow-

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mobile. He'd probably feared that it would be like the animals he'd told me about, that at the final moment he wouldn't have been able to squeeze the trigger. Perhaps in the night he'd even stood over my bed with his rifle, unable to go through with it. This way had made it impersonal, like a lab experiment to be set up and observed.

So Charlie Fuller had murdered himself. But for the authorities, and for Grace, I decided to stick to the suicide story. I didn't think they'd bother too much about things like the absence of powder burns. Under the circumstances they were stuck with my story, and I wanted to keep it simple. As I said in the beginning, I'm no detective.

NEXT MONTH . . .

special 7 COMPLETE NOVELETS issue

LAWRENCE TREAT's *S As in Shooting*

CORNELL WOOLRICH's *For the Rest of Her Life*

J. J. MARRIC's *Gideon's War*

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JOHN & WARD HAWKINS' *Shadow of the Noose*

FLETCHER FLORA's *The Scrap of Knowledge*

LLOYD BIGGLE, Jr.'s *Grandfather and the Phantom Thief*

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POISON À LA CARTE

by REX STOUT

(continued from page 98)

Of course I was a monkey. If it had been Stebbins who had made a monkey of me I suppose I would have leaped for a window and dived through. Hitting the pavement from a fourth-story window should be enough to finish a monkey, and life wouldn't be worth living if I had been bamboozled by Purley Stebbins. But obviously it hadn't been him; it had been Peggy Choate or Nora Jaret, or both; Purley had merely accepted an invitation to come and listen in.

So I kept my face. To say I was jaunty would be stretching it, but I didn't scream or tear my hair. "Greetings," I said heartily. "And welcome. I've been wondering why you didn't join us instead of skulking in there in the dark."

"I'll bet you have." He had come to arm's length and stopped. He turned. "You can relax, ladies." Back to me: "You're under arrest for obstructing justice. Come along."

"In a minute. You've got all night." I moved my head. "Of course Peggy and Nora knew this hero was in there, but I'd—"

"I said come along!" he barked.

"And I said in a minute. I intend to ask a couple of questions. I wouldn't dream of resisting arrest, but I've got leg cramp from kneeling too long and if you're in a hurry you'll have to carry me." I moved my eyes. "I'd like to know if you all knew. Did you, Miss Iacono?"

"Of course not."

"Miss Morgan?"

"No."

"Miss Annis?"

"No, I didn't, but I think you did." She tossed her head and the corn silk fluttered. "That was contemptible. Saying you wanted to help us, so we would talk, with a policeman listening."

"And then he arrests me?"

"That's just an act."

"I wish it were. Ask your friends Peggy and Nora if I knew—only I suppose you wouldn't believe them. *They* knew, and they didn't tell you. You'd better all think over everything you said. Okay, Sergeant, the leg cramp's gone."

He actually started a hand for my elbow, but I was moving and it wasn't there. I opened the door to the hall. Of course he had me go first down the three flights; no cop in his senses would descend stairs in front of a dangerous criminal in custody. When we emerged to the sidewalk and he told me to turn left I asked him, "Why not cuffs?"

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"Clown if you want to," he croaked.

He flagged a taxi on Amsterdam Avenue, and when we were in and rolling I spoke. "I've been thinking, about laws and liberties and so on. Take false arrest, for instance. And take obstructing justice. If a man is arrested for obstructing justice and it turns out that he didn't obstruct any justice, does that make the arrest false? I wish I knew more about law. I guess I'll have to ask a lawyer. Nathaniel Parker would know."

It was the mention of Parker, the lawyer Wolfe uses when the occasion calls for one, that got him. He had seen Parker in action.

"They heard you," he said, "and I heard you, and I took some notes. You interfered in a homicide investigation. You quoted the police to them. You told them what the police think, and what they're doing and are going to do. You played a game with them with those pieces of paper to show them exactly how it figures. You tried to get them to tell you things instead of telling the police, and you were going to take them to Nero Wolfe so he could pry it out of them. And you haven't even got the excuse that Wolfe is representing a client. He hasn't got a client."

"Wrong. He has."

"Like hell he has. Name her."

"Not her, him. Fritz Brenner. He is seeing red because food cooked by him was poisoned and killed a man. It's convenient to have the client living right in the house. You admit that a licensed detective has a right to investigate on behalf of a client."

"I admit nothing."

"That's sensible," I said approvingly. "You shouldn't. When you're on the stand being sued for false arrest, it would be bad to have it thrown up to you, and it would be two against one because the hackie could testify. Can you hear us, driver?"

"Sure I can hear you," he sang out. "It's very interesting."

"So watch your tongue," I told Purley. "You could get hooked for a year's pay. As for quoting the police, I merely said that they think it was one of those five, and when Cramer told Mr. Wolfe that he didn't say it was confidential. As for telling them what the police think, same comment. As for playing that game with them, why not? As for trying to get them to tell me things, I won't comment on that at all because I don't want to be rude. That must have been a slip of the tongue. If you ask me why I didn't balk there at the apartment and bring up these points then and there, what was the use? You had spoiled the party. They wouldn't have come downtown with me. Also I am saving a buck of Mr. Wolfe's money, since you had arrested me and therefore the taxi fare is on the city of New York. Am I still under arrest?"

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"You're damn right you are."

"That may be ill-advised. You heard him, driver?"

"Sure I heard him."

"Good. Try to remember it."

We were on Ninth Avenue, stopped at Forty-second Street for a light. When the light changed and we moved, Purley told the hackie to pull over to the curb, and he obeyed. At that time of night there were plenty of gaps. Purley took something from a pocket and showed it to the hackie, and said, "Go get yourself a Coke and come back in ten minutes," and he climbed out and went. Purley turned his head to glare at me.

"I'll pay for the Coke," I offered.

He ignored it. "Lieutenant Rowcliff," he said, "is expecting us at Twentieth Street."

"Fine. Even under arrest, one will get you five that I can make him start stuttering in ten minutes."

"You're not under arrest."

I leaned forward to look at the meter. "Ninety cents. From here on we'll split it."

"Damn it, quit clowning! If you think I'm crawling you're wrong. I just don't see any percentage in it. If I deliver you in custody I know damn well what you'll do. You'll clam up. We won't get a peep out of you, and in the morning you'll make a phone call and Parker will come. What will that get us?"

I could have said, "A suit for false arrest," but I made it, "Only the pleasure of my company."

There was one point of resemblance between Purley and Carol Annis, just one: no sense of humor. "But," he said, "Lieutenant Rowcliff is expecting you, and you're a material witness in a homicide case, and you were up there working on the suspects."

"You could arrest me as a material witness," I suggested.

He uttered a word that I was glad the hackie wasn't there to hear, and added, "You'd clam up and in the morning you'd be out on bail. I know it's after midnight, but the lieutenant is expecting you."

He's a proud man, Purley is, and I wouldn't go so far as to say that he has nothing to be proud of. He's not a bad cop, as cops go. It was a temptation to keep him dangling for a while, to see how long it would take him to bring himself to the point of coming right out and asking for it, but it was late and I needed some sleep.

"You realize," I said, "that it's a waste of time and energy. You can tell him everything we said, and if he tried to go into other aspects with me I'll only start making cracks and he'll start stuttering. It's perfectly useless."

"Yeah, I know, but—"

"But the lieutenant expects me."

He nodded. "It was him Nora Jaret told about it, and he sent me. The Inspector wasn't around."

"Okay. In the interest of justice. I'll give him an hour. That's understood? Exactly one hour."

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"It's not understood with me." He was emphatic. "When we get there you're his and he's welcome to you. I don't know if he can stand you for an hour."

At noon the next day, Thursday, Fritz stood at the end of Wolfe's desk, consulting with him on a major point of policy: whether to switch to another source of supply for water cress. The quality had been below par, which for them means perfection, for nearly a week. I was at my desk, yawning. It had been after two o'clock when I got home from my chat with Lieutenant Rowcliff, and with nine hours' sleep in two nights I was way behind.

The hour since Wolfe had come down at eleven o'clock from his morning session with the orchids had been spent, most of it, by me reporting and Wolfe listening. My visit with Rowcliff needed only a couple of sentences, since the only detail of any importance was that it had taken me eight minutes to get him stuttering, but Wolfe wanted my conversation with the girls verbatim, and also my impressions and conclusions. I told him my basic conclusion was that the only way she could be nailed, barring a stroke of luck, would be by a few dozen men sticking to the routine —her getting the poison and her connection with Pyle.

"And," I added, "her connection with Pyle may be hopeless. In fact, it probably is. If it's Helen Iacono, what she told us is no help. If what she told us is true she had no reason to kill him, and if it isn't true how are you going to prove it? If it's one of the others she is certainly no halfwit, and there may be absolutely nothing to link her up. Being very careful with visitors to your penthouse is fine as long as you're alive, but it has its drawbacks if one of them feeds you arsenic. It may save her neck."

He was regarding me without enthusiasm. "You are saying in effect that it must be left to the police. I don't have a few dozen men. I can expose her only by a stroke of luck."

"Right. Or a stroke of genius. That's your department. I make no conclusions about genius."

"Then why the devil were you going to bring them to me at midnight? Don't answer. I know. To badger me."

"No, sir. I told you. I had got nowhere with them. I had got them looking at each other out of the corners of their eyes, but that was all. I kept on talking, and suddenly I heard myself inviting them to come home with me. I was giving them the excuse that I wanted them to discuss it with you, but that may have been just a cover for certain instincts that a man is entitled to. They are very attractive girls—all but one."

"Which one?"

"That's what we're working on."

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He probably would have harped on it if Fritz hadn't entered to present the watercress problem. As they wrestled with it, dealing with it from all angles, I swiveled my back to them so I could do my yawning in private. Finally they got it settled, deciding to give the present source one more week and then switch if the quality didn't improve; and then I heard Fritz say, "There's another matter, sir. Felix phoned me this morning. He and Zoltan would like an appointment with you after lunch, and I would like to be present. They suggested half-past two, if that will suit your convenience."

"What is it?" Wolfe demanded. "Something wrong at the restaurant?"

"No, sir. Concerning the misfortune of Tuesday evening."

"What about it?"

"It would be better for them to tell you. It is their concern."

I swiveled for a view of Fritz's face. Had Felix and Zoltan been holding out on us? Fritz's expression didn't tell me, but it did tell Wolfe something: that it would be unwise for him to insist on knowing the nature of Felix's and Zoltan's concern because Fritz had said all he intended to. There is no one more obliging than Fritz, but also there is no one more immovable when he has taken a stand. So Wolfe merely said that half-past two would be convenient. When Fritz had left I offered to go to the kitchen and see if I could pry it out of him, but Wolfe said no, apparently it wasn't urgent.

As it turned out, it wasn't. Wolfe and I were still in the dining room, with coffee, when the doorbell rang at 2:25 and Fritz answered it, and when we crossed the hall to the office Felix was in the red leather chair, Zoltan was in one of the yellow ones, and Fritz was standing. Fritz had removed his apron and put on a jacket, which was quite proper. People do not attend business conferences in aprons.

When we had exchanged greetings, and Fritz had been told to sit down and had done so, and Wolfe and I had gone to our desks, Felix spoke. "You won't mind, Mr. Wolfe, if I ask a question? Before I say why we requested an appointment?"

Wolfe told him no, go ahead.

"Because," Felix said, "we would like to know this first. We are under the impression that the police are making no progress. They haven't said so, they tell us nothing, but we have the impression. Is it true?"

"It was true at two o'clock this morning, twelve hours ago. They may have learned something by now, but I doubt it."

"Do you think they will soon make progress? That they will soon be successful?"

"I don't know. I can only conjecture. Archie thinks that unless they have a stroke of luck the inquiry will be long and laborious,

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and even then may fail. I'm inclined to agree with him."

Felix nodded. "That is what we fear—Zoltan and I and others at the restaurant. It is causing a most regrettable atmosphere. A few of our most desirable patrons make jokes, but most of them do not, and some of them do not come. We do not blame them. For the maître d'hôtel and one of our chefs to assist at a dinner where a guest is served poison—that is not pleasant. If the—"

"Confound it, Felix! I have avowed my responsibility. I have apologized. Are you here for the gloomy satisfaction of reproaching me?"

"No, sir." He was shocked. "Of course not. We came to say that if the poisoner is not soon discovered, and then the affair will be forgotten, the effect on the restaurant may be serious. And if the police are making no progress that may happen, so we appeal to you. We wish to engage your professional services. We know that with you there would be no question. You would solve it quickly and completely. We know it wouldn't be proper to pay you from restaurant funds, since you are the trustee, so we'll pay you with our own money. There was a meeting of the staff last night, and all will contribute, in a proper ratio. We appeal to you."

Zoltan stretched out a hand, arm's length. "We appeal to you," he said.

"Pfui," Wolfe grunted.

He had my sympathy. Not only was their matter-of-fact confidence in his prowess highly flattering, but also their appealing instead of demanding, since he had got them into it, was extremely touching. But a man with a long-standing reputation for being hard and blunt simply can't afford the softer feelings, no matter what the provocation. It called for great self-control.

Felix and Zoltan exchanged looks. "He said 'pfui,'" Zoltan told Felix.

"I heard him," Felix snapped. "I have ears."

Fritz spoke. "I wished to be present," he said, "so I could add my appeal to theirs. I offered to contribute, but they said no."

Wolfe took them in, his eyes going right to left and back again. "This is preposterous," he declared. "I said 'pfui' not in disgust but in astonishment. I am solely to blame for this mess, but you offer to pay me to clean it up. Preposterous! You should know that I have already bestirred myself. Archie?"

"Yes, sir. At least you have bestirred me."

He skipped it. "And," he told them, "your coming is opportune. Before lunch I was sitting here considering the situation, and I concluded that the only way to manage the affair with dispatch is to get the wretch to betray herself; and I conceived a plan. For it I need your cooperation. Yours, Zol-

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tan. Your help is essential. Will you give it? I appeal to you."

Zoltan upturned his palms and raised his shoulders. "But yes! But how?"

It is complicated. Also it will require great dexterity and aplomb. How are you on the telephone? Some people are not themselves, not entirely at ease, when they are phoning. A few are even discomfited. Are you?"

"No." He reflected. "I don't think so. No."

"If you are it won't work. The plan requires that you telephone five of those women this afternoon. You will first call Miss Iacono, tell her who you are, and ask her to meet you somewhere—in some obscure restaurant. You will say that on Tuesday evening, when you told me that you had not seen one of them return for a second plate, you were upset and flustered by what had happened, and later, when the police questioned you, you were afraid to contradict yourself and tell the truth. But now that the notoriety is harming the restaurant you feel that you may have to reveal the fact that you did see her return for a second plate, but that before—"

"But I didn't!" Zoltan cried. "I told—"

"Tais-toi!" Felix snapped at him.

Wolfe resumed. "—but that before you do so you wish to discuss it with her. You will say that one reason you have kept silent is that you have been unable to believe that anyone as attractive and charming as she is could be guilty of such a crime. A parenthesis. I should have said at the beginning that you must not try to parrot my words. I am giving you only the substance; the words must be your own, those you would naturally use. You understand that?"

"Yes, sir." Zoltan's hands were clasped tight.

"So don't try to memorize my words. You purpose is to get her to agree to meet you. She will of course assume that you intend to blackmail her, but you will not say so. You will try to give her the impression, in everything you say and in your tone of voice, that you will not demand money from her, but will expect her favors. In short, that you desire her. I can't tell you how to convey that impression; I must leave that to you. The only requisite is that she must be convinced that if she refuses to meet you, you will go at once to the police and tell them the truth."

"Then you know," Zoltan said. "Then she is guilty."

"Not at all. I haven't the slightest idea who is guilty. When you have finished with her you will phone the other four and repeat the performance—Miss Choate, Miss Annis, Miss—"

"My God, Mr. Wolfe! That's impossible!"

"Not impossible, merely difficult. You alone can do it, for they know

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your voice. I considered having Archie do it, imitating your voice, but it would be too risky. You said you would help, but there's no use trying it if the bare idea appalls you. Will you undertake it?"

"I don't . . . I would . . ."

"He will," Felix said. "He is like that. He only needs to swallow it. He will do it well. But I must ask, can he be expected to get them all to agree to meet him? The guilty one, yes, but the others?"

"Certainly not. There is much to discuss and arrange. The innocent ones will react variously according to their tempers. One or more of them will probably inform the police, and I must provide for that contingency with Mr. Cramer." To Zoltan: "Since it is possible that one of the innocent ones will agree to meet you, for some unimaginable reason, you will have to give them different hours for the appointments. There are many details to settle, but that is mere routine. The key is you. You must of course rehearse, and into a telephone transmitter. There are several stations on the house phone. You will go to Archie's room and speak from there. We will listen at the other stations: Archie in the plant rooms, I in my room, Fritz in the kitchen, and Felix here. Archie will handle the other end of the conversation; he is much better qualified than I to improvise the responses of young women.

"Do you want me to repeat the substance of what you are to say before rehearsal?"

Zoltan opened his mouth and closed it again.

"Yes," he said.

Sergeant Purley Stebbins shifted his fanny for the nth time in two hours. "She's not coming," he muttered. "It's nearly eight o'clock." His chair was about half big enough for his personal dimensions.

We were squeezed in a corner of the kitchen of John Piotti's little restaurant on 14th Street between Second and Third Avenues. On the midget table between us were two notebooks, his and mine and a small metal case. Of the three cords extending from the case, the two in front went to the earphones we had on, and the one at the back ran down the wall, through the floor, along the basement ceiling toward the front, back up through the floor, and on through a table top, where it was connected to a microphone hidden in a bowl of artificial flowers. The installation, a rush order, had cost Wolfe $191.67. Permission to have it made had cost him nothing because he had once got John Piotti out of a difficulty and hadn't soaked him beyond reason.

"We'll have to hang on," I said. "You never can tell with a redhead."

The exposed page of my notebook was blank, but Purley had written on his. As follows:

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Helen Iacono	6:00 p.m.
Peggy Choate	7:30 p.m.
Carol Annis	9:00 p.m.
Lucy Morgan	10:30 p.m.
Nora Jaret	12:00 p.m.

It was in my head. If I had had to write it down I would certainly have made one "p.m." do, but policemen are trained to do things right.

"Anyhow," Purley said, "we know damn well who it is."

"Don't count your poisoners," I said, "before they're hatched." It was pretty feeble, but I was tired and still short on sleep.

I hoped to heaven he was right, since otherwise the operation was a flop. So far everything had been fine. After half an hour of rehearsing, Zoltan had been wonderful. He had made the five calls from the extension in my room, and when he was through I told him his name should be in lights on a Broadway marquee. The toughest job had been getting Inspector Cramer to agree to Wolfe's terms, but he had no good answer to Wolfe's argument that if he insisted on changing the rules Zoltan wouldn't play. So Purley was in the kitchen with me, Cramer was with Wolfe in the office, prepared to stay for dinner, Zoltan was at the restaurant table with the hidden mike, and two homicide dicks, one male and one female, were at another table twenty feet away. One of the most elaborate charades Nero Wolfe had ever staged.

Purley was right when he said we knew who it was, but I was right too—she hadn't been hatched yet. The reactions to Zoltan's calls had settled it. Helen Iacono had been indignant and after a couple of minutes had hung up on him, and had immediately phoned the District Attorney's office. Peggy Choate had let him finish his spiel and then called him a liar, but she had not said definitely that she wouldn't meet him, and the D.A. or police hadn't heard from her. Carol Annis, after he had spoken his lines, had used only ten words: "Where can I meet you?" and, after he had told her where and when: "All right, I'll be there." Lucy Morgan had coaxed him along, trying to get him to fill it all in on the phone, had finally said she would keep the appointment, and then had rushed downtown and rung our doorbell, told me her tale, demanded that I accompany her to the rendezvous, and insisted on seeing Wolfe. I had to promise to go to get rid of her. Nora Jaret had called him assorted names, from liar on up, or on down, and had told him she had a friend listening in on an extension, which was almost certainly a lie. Neither we nor the law had had a peep from her.

So it was Carol Annis with the

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corn-silk hair, that was plain enough, but there was no salt on her tail. If she was really smart and really tough she might decide to sit tight and not come, figuring that when they came at her with Zoltan's story she would say he was either mistaken or lying, and we would be up a stump. If she was dumb and only fairly tough she might scram. Of course they would find her and haul her back, but if she said Zoltan was lying and she had run because she thought she was being framed, again we would be up a stump. But if she was both smart and tough but not quite enough of either, she would turn up at nine o'clock and join Zoltan. From there on it would be up to him, but that had been rehearsed too, and after his performance on the phone I thought he would deliver.

At half-past eight Purley said, "She's not coming," and removed his earphone.

"I never thought she would," I said. The "she" was of course Peggy Choate, whose hour had been 7:30. "I said you never can tell with a redhead merely to make conversation."

Purley signaled to Piotti, who had been hovering around most of the time, and he brought us a pot of coffee and two fresh cups. The minutes were snails, barely moving. When we had emptied the cups I poured more. At 8:48 Purley put his earphone back on. At 8:56 I asked, "Shall I do a countdown?"

"You'd clown in the hot seat," he muttered, so hoarse that it was barely words. He always gets hoarser as the tension grows; that's the only sign.

It was four minutes past nine when the phone brought me the sound of a chair scraping, then faintly Zoltan's voice saying good evening, and then a female voice, but I couldn't get the words.

"Not loud enough," Purley whispered hoarsely.

"Shut up." I had my pen out. "They're standing up."

There came the sound of chairs scraping, and other little sounds, and then:

Zoltan: Will you have a drink?

Carol: No. I don't want anything.

Zoltan: Won't you eat something?

Carol: I don't feel . . . maybe I will.

Purley and I exchanged glances. That was promising. That sounded as if we might get more than conversation.

Another female voice, belonging to Mrs. Piotti: We have good Osso Buco, madame. Very good. A specialty.

Carol: No, not meat.

Zoltan: A sweet perhaps?

Carol: No.

Zoltan: It is more friendly if we eat. The spaghetti with anchovy sauce is excellent. I had some.

Carol: You had some?

I bit my lip, but he handled it fine.

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Zoltan: I've been here half an hour, I wanted so much to see you. I thought I should order something, and I tried that. I might even eat another portion.

Carol: You should know good food. All right.

Mrs. Piotti: Two spaghetti anchovy. Wine? A very good Chianti?

Carol: No. Coffee.

Pause.

Zoltan: You are more lovely without a veil, but the veil is good too. It makes me want to see behind it. Of course I—

Carol: You have seen behind it, Mr. Mahany.

Zoltan: Ah! You know my name?

Carol: It was in the paper.

Zoltan: I am not sorry that you know it, I want you to know my name, but it will be nicer if you call me Zoltan.

Carol: I might some day. It will depend. I certainly won't call you Zoltan if you go on thinking what you said on the phone. You're mistaken, Mr. Mahany. You didn't see me go back for another plate, because I didn't. I can't believe you would tell a vicious lie about me, so I just think you're mistaken.

Mrs. Piotti, in the kitchen for the spaghetti, came to the corner to stoop and whisper into my free ear, "She's wearing a veil."

Zoltan: I am not mistaken, my dear. That is useless. I know. How could I be mistaken when the first moment I saw you I felt . . . but I will not try to tell you how I felt. If any of the others had come and taken another plate I would have stopped her, but not you. Before you I was dumb. So it is useless.

Needing only one hand for my pen, I used the free one to blow a kiss to Purley.

Carol: I see. So you're sure.

Zoltan: I am, my dear. Very sure.

Carol: But you haven't told the police.

Zoltan: Of course not.

Carol: Have you told Nero Wolfe or Archie Goodwin?

Zoltan: I have told no one. How could I tell anyone? Mr. Wolfe is sure that the one who returned for another plate is the one who killed that man, gave him poison, and Mr. Wolfe is always right. So it is terrible for me. Could I tell anyone that I know you killed a man? You? How could I? That is why I had to see you, to talk with you. If you weren't wearing that veil I could look into your beautiful eyes. I think I know what I would see there. I would see suffering and sorrow. I saw that in your eyes Tuesday evening. I know he made you suffer. I know you wouldn't kill a man unless you had to. That is why—

The voice stopped. That was understandable, since Mrs. Piotti had gone through the door with the spaghetti and coffee and had had time to reach their table. Assorted sounds came as she served them.

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Purley muttered, "He's overdoing it," and I muttered back, "No. He's perfect." Piotti came over and stood looking down at my notebook. It wasn't until after Mrs. Piotti was back in the kitchen that Carol's voice came.

Carol: That's why I am wearing the veil, Zoltan, because I know it's in my eyes. You're right. I had to. He did make me suffer. He ruined my life.

Zoltan: No, my dear. Your life is not ruined. No! No matter what he did. Was he . . . did he . . .

I was biting my lip again. Why didn't he give them the signal? The food had been served and presumably they were eating. He had been told that it would be pointless to try to get her to give him any details of her relations with Pyle, since they would almost certainly be lies. Why didn't he give the signal? Her voice was coming:

Carol: He promised to marry me. I'm only twenty-two years old, Zoltan. I didn't think I would ever let a man touch me again, but the way you . . . I don't know. I'm glad you know I killed him because it will be better now, to know that somebody knows. To know that *you* know. Yes, I had to kill him, I *had* to, because if I didn't I would have had to kill myself. Some day I may tell you what a fool I was, how I—Oh!

Zoltan: What? What's the matter?

Carol: My bag. I left it in my car. Out front. And I didn't lock the car. A blue Plymouth hardtop. Would you . . . I'll go . . .

Zoltan: I'll get it.

The sound came of his chair scraping, then faintly his footsteps, and then silence. But the silence was broken in ten seconds, whereas it would have taken him much longer to go for the purse and return. What broke it was a male voice saying, "I'm an officer of the law, Miss Annis," and a noise from Carol. Purley, shedding his earphone, jumped up and went, and I followed, notebook in hand.

It was quite a tableau. The male dick stood with a hand on Carol's shoulder. Carol sat stiff, her chin up, staring straight ahead. The female dick, not much older than Carol, stood facing her from across the table, holding with both hands, at breast level, a plate of spaghetti. She spoke to Purley. "She put something in it and then stuck something in her dress. I saw her in my mirror."

I moved in. After all, I was in charge, under the terms Cramer had agreed to. "Thank you, Miss Annis," I said. "You were a help. On a signal from Zoltan they were going to start a commotion to give him an excuse to leave the table, but you saved them the trouble. I thought you'd like to know. Come on, Zoltan. All over. According to plan."

He had entered and stopped three paces off, a blue handbag un-

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der his arm. As he moved toward us Purley put out a hand. "I'll take that."

Cramer was in the red leather chair. Carol Annis was in a yellow one facing Wolfe's desk, with Purley on one side of her and his female colleague on the other. The male colleague had been sent to the laboratory with the plate of spaghetti and a small roll of paper that had been fished from inside Carol's dress. Fritz, Felix, and Zoltan were on the couch near the end of my desk.

"I will not pretend, Miss Annis," Wolfe was saying. "One reason that I persuaded Mr. Cramer to have you brought here first on your way to limbo was that I needed to appease my rancor. You had injured and humiliated not only me, but also one of my most valued friends, Fritz Brenner, and two other men whom I esteem, and I had arranged the situation that gave you your opportunity; and I wished them to witness your own humiliation, contrived by me in my presence."

"That's enough of that," Cramer growled.

Wolfe ignored him. "I admit the puerility of that reason, Miss Annis, but in candor I wanted to acknowledge it. A better reason was that I wished to ask you a few questions. You took such prodigious risks that it is hard to believe in your sanity, and it would give me no satisfaction to work vengeance on a madwoman. What would you have done if Felix's eyes had been on you when you entered with the plate of poison and went to Mr. Pyle? Or if, when you returned to the kitchen for a second plate, Zoltan had challenged you? What would you have done?"

No answer. Apparently she was holding her gaze straight at Wolfe, but from my angle it was hard to tell because she still had the veil on. Asked by Cramer to remove it, she had refused. When the female dick had extracted the roll of paper from inside Carol's dress she had asked Cramer if she should pull the veil off and Cramer had said no. No rough stuff.

There was no question about Wolfe's gaze at her. He was forward in his chair, his palms flat on his desk. He persisted. "Will you answer me, Miss Annis?"

She wouldn't.

"Are you a lunatic, Miss Annis?"

She wasn't saying.

Wolfe's head jerked to me. "Is she deranged, Archie?"

That was unnecessary. When we're alone I don't particularly mind his insinuations that I presume to be an authority on women, but there was company present. I gave him a look and snapped, "No comment."

He returned to her. "Then that must wait. I leave to the police such matters as your procurement of the poison and your relations with Mr.

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Pyle, mentioning only that you cannot now deny possession of arsenic, since you used it a second time this evening. It will unquestionably be found in the spaghetti and in the roll of paper you concealed in your dress; and so, manifestly, if you are mad you are also ruthless and malevolent. You may have been intolerably provoked by Mr. Pyle, but not by Zoltan. He presented himself not as a nemesis, but as a bewitched champion. He offered his homage, making no demands, and your counter-offer was death."

"You lie," Carol said. "And he lied. He was going to lie about me. He didn't see me go back for a second plate, but he was going to say he did. And you lie. He did make demands. He threatened me."

Wolfe's brows went up. "Then you haven't been told?"

"Told what?"

"That you were overheard. That is the other question I had for you. I have no apology for contriving the trap, but you deserve to know you are in its jaws. All that you and Zoltan said was heard by two men at the other end of a wire in another room, and they recorded it—Mr. Stebbins of the police, now at your left, and Mr. Goodwin."

"You lie," she said.

"No, Miss Annis. This isn't the trap; it has already been sprung. You have it, Mr. Stebbins?"

Purley nodded. He hates to answer questions from Wolfe.

"Archie?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did Zoltan threaten her or make demands?"

"No, sir. He followed instructions."

He returned to Carol. "Now you know. I wanted to make sure of that. To finish, since you may have had a just and weighty grievance against Mr. Pyle, I would myself prefer to see you made to account for your attempt to kill Zoltan, but that is not in my discretion. In any case, my rancor is appeased, and I hold—"

"That's enough," Cramer blurted, leaving his chair. "I didn't agree to let you preach at her all night. Bring her along, Sergeant."

As Purley arose a voice came. "May I say something?" It was Fritz. Heads turned as he left the couch and moved, detouring around Zoltan's feet and Purley's bulk to get to Carol, and turning to stand looking down at her.

"On account of what Mr. Wolfe said," he told her. "He said you injured me, and that is true. It is also true that I wanted him to find you. I can't speak for Felix, and you tried to kill Zoltan and I can't speak for him, but I can speak for myself. I forgive you."

"You lie," Carol said.

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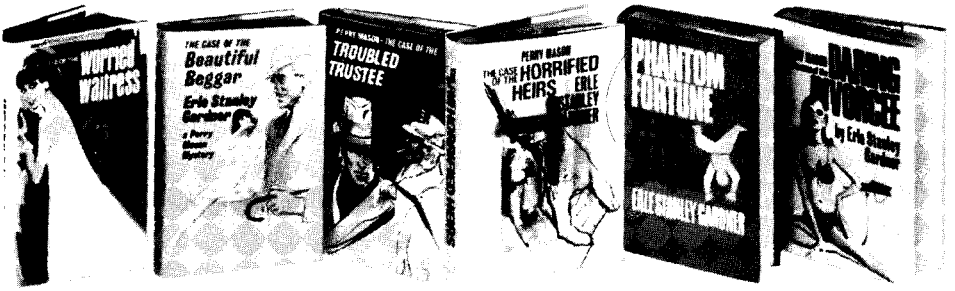
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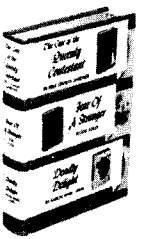

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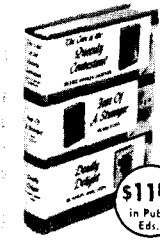

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